

**This book is with  
tight  
Binding**



MAIN

029.6 T57

---

## Keep Your Card in This Pocket

---

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



**Public Library**  
**Kansas City, Mo.**



3 1148 00473 6534









*How Writers Write*



# HOW WRITERS WRITE u1

Essays by Contemporary Authors

Edited by  
**NETTIE S. TILLET**

The Woman's College of the  
University of North Carolina



**THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY**  
PUBLISHERS : : NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1937

By THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY

---

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine or newspaper.

## *Foreword*

“THERE IS A TRADITIONAL opinion,” says William Ellery Leonard in his essay on writing poetry found in this volume, “that the poetic process is something everlastingly miraculous, a notion fostered by the poets themselves.” The same traditional opinion seems to cling to all forms of creative writing—a phrase used editorially in this volume to include every piece of writing conceived primarily as a work of art—though the present collection proves that not all writers may be charged with fostering it. In the essays here brought together a number of justly celebrated authors, most of them encouraged by good magazine editors, have undertaken to dispel some of the mystery surrounding literary workmanship and have frankly divulged the devices of which they make use. Without entirely uprooting a belief in “the divine madness” behind every great creation, these analyses of methods suggest means whereby the inexperienced writer may often substitute logical procedure for blind fumbling. In fact, they may even transform what Miss Glasgow has called “the inspired amateur or infant pathologist” all too frequently



striving to enter the literary market, into a sane apprentice who realizes that literary craftsmanship, like skill in industrial arts, must be acquired by earnest and persistent labor and with heed to suggestions from masters of the craft.

In this collection of essays every major form of artistic writing is discussed by a writer who has mastered the form—in other words, to borrow again from Mr. Leonard, discussed “from the inside.” Some of the discussions, furthermore, furnish models for critical writing. The volume has value, therefore, for the student of composition and for the aspirant writer. But the value is not limited to the would-be writer. Not only have several of the authors explained how they set about their work, but all of them have made sagacious comments upon literary forms, and altogether they have illuminated the entire range of artistic expression. Readers of such essays should become more generally intelligent concerning the literary forms so treated and more appreciative of them. Mr. Philip Wylie’s expressed hope that readers of his article on “Writing for the Movies” will “never again be able to attend the cinema with quite the same attitude” promises fulfilment *per se*.

It is with the conviction that these essays have value for reader and writer alike that this effort to give them more permanent circulation is made. To

bring them together thus would, of course, have been impossible without the generosity and co-operation of a number of editors and publishers as well as of the authors themselves, and for their assistance the editor of the volume expresses appreciation. She wishes to acknowledge particularly the generosity of Miss Drew, Miss Glasgow, Mr. Green, Mr. Leonard, Mr. Nicolson, Mr. Waters, and of the editors of the *Saturday Review of Literature* (with especial expression to Miss Loveman), of the *Forum*, and of the Bookman Publishing Company.

N. S. T.

*Greensboro, North Carolina,  
January, 1937.*



## Table of Contents

	PAGE
I. "THE CREATIVE TASK" (Preface to <i>The Nigger of the Narcissus</i> )—Joseph Conrad	13
II. A LITTLE OLD LADY PASSES AWAY—John P. Waters . . . . .	23
III. THE LOST ART OF THE ESSAY—Elizabeth Drew . . . . .	35
IV. HOW I WRITE BIOGRAPHY—Harold Nicolson	53
V. HOW I WRITE SHORT STORIES—Somerset Maugham . . . . .	69
VI. THE SECRET GARDEN—Edith Wharton . . .	85
VII. HEROES AND MONSTERS—Ellen Glasgow . .	109
VIII. DRAMA AND THE WEATHER—Paul Green . .	119
IX. WRITING FOR THE MOVIES—Philip Wylie . .	133 -
X. THE POETIC PROCESS FROM THE INSIDE—William Ellery Leonard . . . . .	169
XI. LETTER TO A YOUNG POET—Virginia Woolf	191
XII. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES . . . . .	217



*“The Creative Task”*



## I

### *"The Creative Task"*<sup>1</sup>

JOSEPH CONRAD

A WORK THAT ASPIRES, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal. Impressed by the aspect of the world the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into facts—whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazard-

---

<sup>1</sup>From *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, by Joseph Conrad, copyright 1897, 1914, by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc. [The title is a phrase taken from the Preface and here applied to it by the editor.]



ous enterprise of living. They speak authoritatively to our common-sense, to our intelligence, to our desire of peace or to our desire of unrest; not seldom to our prejudices, sometimes to our fears, often to our egoism—but always to our credulity. And their words are heard with reverence, for their concern is with weighty matters: with the cultivation of our minds and the proper care of our bodies, with the attainment of our ambitions, with the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims.

It is otherwise with the artist.

Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities—like the vulnerable body within a steel armor. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring—and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom: to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more

permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

It is only some such train of thought, or rather of feeling, that can in a measure explain the aim of the attempt, made in the tale which follows, to present an unrestful episode in the obscure lives of a few individuals out of all the disregarded multitude of the bewildered, the simple, and the voiceless. For, if there is any part of truth in the belief confessed above, it becomes evident that there is not a place of splendor or a dark corner of the earth that does not deserve, if only a passing glance of wonder and pity. The motive, then, may be held to justify the matter of the work; but this preface, which is simply an avowal of endeavor, cannot end here—for the avowal is not yet complete.

Fiction—if it at all aspires to be art—appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting,

like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal, to be effective, must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the color of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

The sincere endeavor to accomplish that creative

task, to go as far on that road as his strength will carry him, to go undeterred by faltering, weariness or reproach, is the only valid justification for the worker in prose. And if his conscience is clear, his answer to those who, in the fulness of a wisdom which looks for an immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or charmed, must run thus:—My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its color, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its color, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each

convincing moment. In a single-minded attempt of that kind, if one be deserving and fortunate, one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.

It is evident that he who, rightly or wrongly, holds by the convictions expressed above cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft. The enduring part of them—the truth which each only imperfectly veils—should abide with him as the most precious of his possessions, but they all; Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism (which like the poor, is exceedingly difficult to get rid of) all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him—even on the very threshold of the temple—to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work. In that uneasy solitude the supreme cry of Art for Art itself loses the exciting ring of its apparent immorality. It sounds far off. It has ceased to be a cry, and is heard only as a whisper, often incomprehensible, but at times and faintly encouraging.

Sometimes, stretched at ease in the shade of a roadside tree, we watch the motions of a laborer in a distant field, and after a time, begin to wonder languidly as to what the fellow may be at. We watch the movements of his body, the waving of his arms, we see him bend down, stand up, hesitate, begin again. It may add to the charm of an idle hour to be told the purpose of his exertions. If we know he is trying to lift a stone, to dig a ditch, to uproot a stump, we look with a more real interest at his efforts; we are disposed to condone the jar of his agitation upon the restfulness of the landscape, and even, if in a brotherly frame of mind, we may bring ourselves to forgive his failure. We understood his object, and, after all, the fellow has tried, and perhaps he had not the strength—and perhaps he had not the knowledge. We forgive, go on our way—and forget.

And so it is with the workman of art. Art is long and life is short, and success is very far off. And, thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim—the aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult—obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult.

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy

about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and color, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, or a smile—such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished—behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest.

*A Little Old Lady Passes Away*





## II

### *A Little Old Lady Passes Away*<sup>1</sup>

JOHN P. WATERS

THE FAMILIAR ESSAY, THAT lavender-scented little old lady of literature, has passed away. Search the magazines for her sparrowy whimses, and in all but one or two of them you will find, in her stead, crisp articles, blatant exposés, or statistic-laden surveys. Even in the few that admit her pale ghost to their circle of economists, sociologists, and Washington correspondents, her position is decidedly subordinate: a scant column or two near the insurance advertisements at the back of the book. Her mourners—and there still are many—wonder why. There was a time. . . .

There was a time when the familiar essay was important; so important that *The Atlantic Monthly* Press issued four printings of a book explaining its characteristics and construction; so important that Christopher Morley, the little old lady's favorite American nephew, took time off to anthologize her

---

<sup>1</sup> From the *Forum*, July, 1933. Used by permission of the author and the *Forum*.

for admiring high-school teachers and their victims in English I-II, who were often led to believe that all literature, like all Gaul, was divided into three parts: fiction, poetry (pronounced poy'tree), and the familiar essay, with the familiar essay far in the lead as a literary form.

This last, this classifying it as a form, was not always easy to do. Those who tried usually gave Montaigne the credit for originating it and traced its development through Abraham Cowley, Thomas Browne, *Blackwood's Magazine*, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Thackeray. In tone and content, however, the essays of these pioneers little resembled the ones that this generation of readers remembers. Indeed, about all that links them is the common note of personal expression, the feeling that behind the words is a human being and not an omniscient voice. Yet even in this quality there is a difference between the old and the new.

In the former, though one was aware of personality, one was still conscious of the writer's dignity, of a slight barrier that he raised between himself and his audience. In the latter, this dignity was all too often missing, discarded for buttonholing intimacy, cracker-barrel philosophizing, and Winnie-the-Pooh whimsy.

What brought about this change? Why did so

many modern essayists err in carrying familiarity too far? To find the answer, we must consider what the modern form was like at its best, and why it was popular.

At its best, the familiar essay was "a kind of improvisation on a delicate theme, a species of soliloquy; as if a man were to speak aloud the slender and whimsical thoughts that come to his mind when he is alone on a winter evening before a warm fire."

Intimacy, reverie, whimsey—these were the qualities that won it thousands of devoted readers, that made it kindly relief from frowning treatises, ramrod sermons, and all the high and mighty didacticism our fathers were flayed with before its advent. It was warm and human, unconcerned with life's granite problems, but fascinated with the trifles, moods, and humors that colored the lives of its readers. It was comfortable literature, muddying no quiet pools with a stirred-up sense of sin, goading no laggard ambition to be something. Instead, it chatted easily and urbanely, graceful successor to the gradually dying art of conversation.

With so much in its favor, what caused its downfall? The answer is: the same qualities that made it popular—intimacy, reverie, whimsey. These qualities elicited so many gurgles of, "How charming! What a delightfully helpless fellow the author must

be!" from sisters, wives, and maiden aunts, that literarily inclined gentlemen who had not been gushed over for years immediately concluded that the way to become inundated in gush was to put themselves in print as quaint old fuss-budgets. As a consequence, starveling hacks raced bony clergymen to the mail-boxes with manuscripts that would make them "dears" and "darlings" to the petticoated portion of the populace.

They succeeded, of course, for the trick was easy. One had only to empty his mind of all knowledge, all common-sense, all everything, except tender quotations from Horace and Tennyson, and start reacting. Anything was a fit subject, the simpler and more far-fetched the better. For example, Mr. Percival Biggs—a six-foot giant who had played tackle for Yale in the days when football was played with the feet—would suddenly develop all the cute physical attributes of a pansy when confronted by the relatively simple problem of stoking his hot-air furnace. Instead of being a harmless cylinder of sheet-metal, it became "an insatiable scarlet-mawed monster." His modest two tons of winter coal became "sable diamonds" to be "immolated thrice daily." He himself was transformed from a lazy suburbanite to a "quaking panderer to Zoroaster." He wallowed in self-pity.

There were other schools, too. The mellowists, for example, did not want to be darlings. They wanted to be ripe, winey. Young men of twenty, green as quinces, ripened overnight. No Village attic lacked its fireside philosopher with his bowl of russet apples, his October cider, his Sherlock Holmes pipe, and his tin of Craven's Mixture—as unmellow a blend of grass and red-pepper, by the way, as Britain's abominable tobacconists ever foisted upon gullible Anglophiles. Reverie took the place of all other mental functions, and bookish archaisms from Evelyn and Pepys bid fair to drive out all other words from thesaurus and dictionary.

Worst of all, however, were the coy writers, the ones who defied death-by-strangulation with little tinklings called "An' Him Went Home to Him's Muvver." Others of these twitterers delighted in tickling the risqué with the feather end of their pens. Never boorishly, of course. A mild *damn*—in quotation marks—perhaps. Or the impish suggestion that they—pagans that they were—sometimes didn't quite close their shower-curtains all the way. This group was especially dear to schoolmarms from Brookline, Mass., who—during the months that Columbia Summer School was open—made life on the West Side subway utterly unbearable for native-born New Yorkers by staring them into nervous fits in an effort to gather

first-hand material for hellish little papers on "The Typical New Yorker—Poor Thing."

At first, of course, these insect pests were few in number, and their buzzings were harmless enough. But when ever-increasing hordes discovered that writing the familiar essay was the ovaltine their egos needed, the end was near. No literature that is peopled exclusively with doddering loons afraid of sewing-machine flywheels, bewildered by the complex mechanics of hot-water faucets, and hero-stricken with such worthies as tympani thumpers, elevator starters, scissor grinders, and street cleaners can survive long.

The final axe fell when the high schools, with well-meaning but pitifully misdirected affection, took to teaching the fragile art to their fuzzy-lipped brats. Where there was one asinine but educated gush-hunter before, there were now whole herds of pubescent illiterates to annoy friends, relatives, and editors with misspelled masterpieces patterned after, or swiped from, the models their texts supplied.

For texts were essential paraphernalia in the tax-supported essay mills. Though the ninth-grade savants brashly disregarded the fact that the only endurable familiar essayist is a person with well-digested learning, impeccable syntax, urbane humor, pleasant sophistication, and indisputable savoir-faire,

they were realistic to the extent that they provided inspiration for off-days when their darlings were not quite equal to scintillating out a three-hundred-word tiara for Miss Sophie Spragg to display at the next Parent-Teacher meeting. Consequently, they selected texts that made plagiarism as easy as possible by presenting carefully preserved specimens in neatly labelled blocks: "Essays of Type I—Personal Experiences, Confessions, Self-Analyses; Essays of Type II—Reflections on Life, Human Nature, Customs, and Experience; Essays of Type III—Observations and Discoveries in the familiar and the Commonplace; Essays of Type IV—Nature Essays; Essays of Type V—General Observations, Comments, and Opinions of the Author."

Yet helpful as this break-down was, it was only preliminary and padding to the real meat of the book—the Appendix, which listed some two hundred and fifty "suggested titles." These were always added apologetically; for of course out of the adolescents' wide reading, mature wisdom, and glowing personalities would flow so many "topics" that such a list was almost an insult. Still, to be on the safe side, the text-writers always left it there; and it is remarkable how hungrily, and thankfully, the mute inglorious Morleys swallowed its insults and wrote, as per suggestion, on "My Ailments" (No. 27), "On Being



Small" (No. 38), "Why the Dessert Course Last?" (No. 67), "Nature's Languages" (No. 174), or—supreme inspiration—"Diddling" (No. 225).

With such near-Berbohm flowing into it, no form, let alone the most delicate, could retain its sparkle. Worse still, the public's palate became corrupted. Those who did not turn away in disgust either preferred the spurious stuff to the vintage products of the Morleys, Conrads, and McFees, or took to regarding all essays and all essayists with stiff-necked contempt. And why not? Weren't they themselves able to bat out essays by the yard? Didn't they know all the tricks the masters used in building up their effects? And what, pray, was so wonderful about Hilaire Belloc? Anybody could do as well; and because anybody could, nobody wanted to.

What else, then, could the little old lady do but die as unobtrusively as possible? The children who had gathered around her hassock to hear her thin little musings had all grown up and gone away—or remained to mock her quaintness with their new-found wisdom. Radio, prohibition, and prosperity were stinging their senses with more peppery fare. A new and dizzyingly complex world had roared across the quiet hearth; and listeners once sure of their philosophies and content to roam in the pleasant meadows of reverie now groped bewilderedly for

*facts*, explanations, anything to help them realign their lives before new discoveries, new techniques, drove out all meaning from life itself. Reverie, whimsey, and humor were out; they didn't get you anywhere.

Hence, gradually, the little old lady deserted her familiar haunts and faded away. Occasionally a sentimental editor, remembering her pleasant tea-table chatter, invites her fluttery ghost to visit his prim Caslon pages. There, politely baffled by the loud talk of collectivism and social trends and economic determinism all about her, she sits a while and muses with her old friends. Then she leaves and does not come back for months at a time. One day, perhaps, her pale ghost will not appear at all, and the hard young sociologists can have her pages all to themselves. But I hope not. For all their cocksure-*ologies*, they cannot comfort us the way she did—when she was at her best.



*The Lost Art of the Essay*



### III

## *The Lost Art of the Essay*<sup>1</sup>

ELIZABETH DREW

WHAT IS AN ESSAY? IT IS impossible not to agree with J. B. Priestley that the simplest and safest definition of the essay is that it is a kind of composition produced by an essayist. The term is indeed so wide that it is meaningless. If we try to bring Locke's "Essay on the Human Understanding" and Lamb on "Old China" within the limits of a single definition, it obviously cannot be done. The essay may be a dissertation, a piece of rhetoric, an argument, a discussion. It may deal with a religious, economic, historical, sociological, scientific, or philosophical subject, or any other kind of subject. But it is clear that there is something very much narrower in definition which we really mean when we speak of the essay in any general discussion of literature. We mean a form of writing which aims definitely at certain literary values: that is, it aims at

---

<sup>1</sup>From the *Saturday Review of Literature*, February 16, 1935. Used by permission of the author and the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

using language as a medium to present life in a way of its own.

As Virginia Woolf says:

Of all forms of literature, the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake refreshed with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most varied experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation . . . but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world.

It is true that the class of writings which we usually mean when we speak of essays, does not have the rousing and animating quality of Burke or Milton. Its aim is much milder, its achievement quite different. The supreme art of the essay proper, that special type of writing which was originated and invented by Montaigne, and dates from the first publication of his "Essaies" in March, 1571, is to communicate personality. The essay (the word was used by Montaigne simply to denote experiments in a new form of writing) is the most direct form of prose communication between author and reader: it is deliberate egotism and self-revelation. Montaigne

wrote the epigraph for all essayists—"These are fancies of my own, by which I do not pretend to discover things, but to lay open myself." As Lamb said of him, "His own character pervades the whole, and binds it sweetly together"; and it is significant that Coleridge said of Lamb himself, "Charles Lamb has more totality and individuality of character than any other man I know."

This is the character the perfect essayist requires. He says with Sir Thomas Browne: "The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast my eye on. For the other I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation." The novelist or the dramatist requires to be detached from his own personality. He may be David Copperfield or Jane Eyre or Hamlet, but he must also be Dick Swiveller or Paul Emmanuel or Lady Macbeth. But the essayist must never be more than one character. The personality with which he writes may not be entirely his own, but it must be a complete personality. Elia is not the whole of Charles Lamb, nor the Spectator the whole of Joseph Addison, but they are each a completely recognizable person. We can walk round them and feel we know them in the most actual and tangible way. And we must have this sense of intimacy with the essay-writer; it is the essential of his peculiar and



difficult art. He must always be the same person, and we must never be out of his company. Whatever other personality or situation or circumstance he presents, whatever book or picture or actor he is discussing, he is at pains to remind us all the time that it is *his* vision of them we are sharing. The main interest is always shifted subtly from the subject of the essay to the kind of mind and being—the personality—which is writing of that subject. Creative egotism is the secret of the essayist, an egotism which happens, in the hands of an artist, as if it were the most simple and natural thing in the world, while in reality it is never successful unless it is presented with supreme skill—just as his subject matter appears desultory and meandering, and is really the most carefully conceived and constructed of unities.

Alexander Smith, a minor writer of the mid-nineteenth century, who wrote a good essay "On the Writing of Essays" in a volume called DREAMTHORP, says that the essay resembles the lyric in that both are moulded by some central mood, whimsical, serious, or satirical. "Given the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows round it as a cocoon grows round the silkworm." This is a good image of the essayist's art, and is a better starting point for the illustrating of essays than a mere history of the subject. But a few chronological landmarks

are perhaps helpful. Montaigne died in 1592, and the first ten of Bacon's essays appeared in print five years later, and were the first essays to be published in England. He increased the number to fifty-eight in the final edition of 1625. But although Bacon must have taken the idea of the essay from Montaigne, nothing could be more different than the "moods" from which each of the two spins his thread. Montaigne must always remain the perfect example of the essayist temperament—sympathetic, humorous, unexpected, lovable, passionately curious in his search after psychological truth—while Bacon takes this new instrument for writing of the world as it is seen through the eyes of a temperament, and manages to turn it into something completely inhuman. Montaigne is a warm flesh and blood figure, sitting at ease at his study writing-table underneath the beam on which is carved: "I do not understand; I pause; I examine." Bacon is a chilly statue of Wisdom, commenting on human life in the manner of a great judge in his robes and ermine, with the greatest brilliance and the greatest detachment. The subject is always perfectly planned and presented, but it is all entirely external and general. It has all been thought, never felt.

It was not until Cowley's essays were published in 1668 that the tone of Montaigne crept into the Eng-

lish essay. Cowley's talent is a small one, his personality is not interesting or varied enough to bear very much exploitation of it: the vein is very soon worked out, but what there is of it is gold. In his essay "Of Myself" there is the true flavor—that intimacy and warmth of spirit, that fresh simplicity and apparent artlessness. It creates its own charm as it flows along: it is nothing, and yet it is delightful. \*

Some of the essays of Sir William Temple (Dorothy Osborne's husband) have this same note, but it was the coming of the periodical newspaper which really established the essay in popularity. This created a market for it, which it has never lost, so that it was not only aristocratic dilettantes who could afford to practice it; and it developed that easy, friendly manner which comes from the essayist's sense that he is writing for a familiar circle of readers who are in sympathy with him. It also encouraged the essayist to write on the subjects which make the best essays—incidents of daily life about him, the immediate, the personal, the tangible, not the abstract and indefinite. On April 12th, 1709, the first number of *The Tatler*, one little folded sheet of paper, appeared at the breakfast tables of the aristocracy and in the coffee-houses of the town, and from then onwards the eighteenth century was deluged with essays. To our modern taste, the majority of these essays are completely un-

readable except in small extracts, and indeed the capacity of the reading public of the eighteenth century for swallowing pills in jam is one of the most surprising things about it. Why, with the example of that century before us, we continue to regard the Victorian age as the great age of moral lessons in literature is a mystery. At no time did the daily and weekly reading of the majority concern itself so much with the moral conduct of life as it did in the eighteenth century. If Steele gives a charming description of a happy family, he will follow it up with a paper about the death of the wife and mother and a discussion of the ethics of Loss. Even the Sir Roger de Coverley papers, the great artistic achievement of the eighteenth-century essay, are apt to be interrupted by Addison's insistence on pointing the moral, and the same is true of Goldsmith. The essay became the vehicle of platitude rather than of experience: the essayists will not let themselves be themselves because they are all so busy feeling they must be the Censor. And as a result, though it would be easy to make an anthology of first-rate passages from the eighteenth-century essayists, it is not surprising that the heart of the average student sinks when he is told that if he wants to write good prose he must give his days and nights to the study of Addison. Addison is a very dull writer, and the volumes of *The Tatler* and

*The Spectator* are dull volumes, and there are many equally good writers of prose.

And yet it is not really because the eighteenth century is so concerned about problems of conduct that it is dull: it is because of the way in which the writers treat of them. We are all, as a matter of fact, interested in ethical questions and in reading about them, but we are not interested in having a purely conventional and general code of social and personal morality applied to every subject. It is that which stifles the individuality which is the breath of life to the essayist. Dr. Johnson's opinion of Addison fits many more than Addison: "He thinks justly, but he thinks faintly." There is nothing vigorous, energetic, or personal in the moral values of these men. If, however, moral feeling be an essential part of the mood in which the essay is conceived—instead of being merely tacked on as an adjunct—it becomes an essential part of its total quality and effect, and we would not wish it otherwise. Ethical feeling can lap us round as securely as any other mood.

It is no longer the fashion now to read Robert Louis Stevenson. His vogue during his life and immediately after his early death was so great and glowing that a reaction was bound to set in. But his popularity will inevitably return. He was a second-rate novelist, for his creative gift was never

substantial enough to write great novels, but he is a first-rate essayist. And the mood of all, or almost all, of his essays is an ethical one; he spins its thread around some problem of conduct or some tenet of his own individual faith. Stevenson had to struggle all his life with an incurable disease: he did his work unflinchingly against appalling odds. But the strange thing about his extraordinarily vivid personality was that it produced an attitude to life which, instead of being one of splendid stoical endurance of suffering, managed to be one of positive exhilaration. He justifies life because it is a battle; it is only over-prudence and timidity which he finds paralyzing. With Stevenson we are very far removed from the bony conventional morality of the eighteenth century. We are in the company of a clear-cut, witty, courageous, sensitive personality, and we are in the presence of an artist in prose.

The moods in which the problems of human conduct are of supreme importance can therefore be the basis of the essayist's art as much as any other moods. But it is true that they very seldom do make thoroughly successful essays. If a personality is passionately concerned with such questions, it is ten to one that his calling will not be that of an essayist; he will be expressing his personality in some more immediately practical way. We may safely say that but for

the accident of ill-health Stevenson would not have been content to have written essays. The essay which the man of such a temperament writes is seldom as we say "pure literature." It has an ulterior aim: it seeks to convert or persuade, to argue, to discuss, to analyze, to explain. It goes over into history or politics or criticism, like Macaulay or Carlyle or Arnold. But the pure essayist, as Virginia Woolf says, seeks only to give pleasure, and we read him with no ulterior aim ourselves. His own occupations and his own acquaintance are his subject matter, and we ask for nothing of more public or general importance.

From very early days, when minor seventeenth-century writers wrote "characters," which, in general, were nothing but wooden descriptions of commonplace types, the essayist was fond of the character sketch. It lends itself naturally to the essay, and as we have said the Sir Roger papers hold a unique place among early essays. Goldsmith did something of the same sort in his pictures of Beau Tibbs, and Lamb's "Captain Jackson" is a little masterpiece in that style. These, however, are all very simple in their method of presentation, and a more complex treatment, which is indeed a most masterly illustration of the technique of the essay, is Hazlitt's "My First Acquaintance with Poets." It is a long essay—twenty-five pages in the edition I have of it—but

once started upon it, there is no one, I think, who has any interest in the literary personalities of the early nineteenth century, who could possibly want to stop. It opens without preamble, and we are at once in the atmosphere of living presences, of Coleridge and Hazlitt and Hazlitt's father, Wordsworth and Dorothy, and Lamb for a moment. The reader is so caught up and carried along by the writing, that it is not until the whole is analyzed and anatomized that we realize the brilliance of the artistry with which its varied strands are knit together, its varied emotions fused into a unity of effect. It appeals to so much of the total human consciousness: to purely intellectual interests, to dramatic emotions, to the sense of common curiosity, to reverence and admiration, to laughter and pity, to eye and ear and physical sensation, and to the ache in the heart of every human being who has lost his youth and its dreams.

It is time to say something of the greatest artist among English essay-writers—Charles Lamb. It would be interesting to work out a comparison between his essay on "Old China" and Hazlitt's "My First Acquaintance with Poets," and to note in detail the different methods of two artists, with widely different personalities, dealing with something of the same sort of theme. Both create extraordinarily living figures and both intertwine the past and the present to gain



a particular effect. Lamb writes in a mood of comedy, Hazlitt in one of disillusion; Lamb uses the dramatic method, Hazlitt the descriptive; and each essay is a masterpiece of its kind. But something more general must be said of Lamb.

I suspect there are times when all readers who do not regard Lamb as "Saint Charles" find his exaggerated "quaintness" irritating; when his description of his own writings as "villainously prank't in an affected array of antique modes and phrases" seems justly to sum up their weakness; when his so carefully created personality palls. But these are definitely, I think, some of those occasions when the reader is at fault, when "habit and lethargy have dulled his palate!" For to come freshly and without prejudice to Lamb is to confess that, within the limits of the essay, he is perfection. This perfection is partly the result of a unique temperament, partly the effect of a unique kind of learning and thinking, and partly sheer technical mastery of his medium. One great element in his success is the tangibility, the concreteness of the world he creates. Lamb is sometimes spoken of as if he were a shy, elusive, almost dim figure. He was, of course, shy and retiring in life; he stammered and was insignificant-looking; he hated publicity and "occasions." But there is no one who is more clearly embodied in his writing.

There the outline of his own figure is clean-edged, firm, and sure, projected in the round, unlike the figure of anybody else, significant, unique. We know Lamb as perhaps we know no other writer of essays. The precision and clarity and grace of his presentation of himself delight the sensuous imagination everywhere. There is never the slightest danger in Lamb of the atmosphere being dispersed by his lack of the skill to sustain it. There is no blurring or feebleness or fumbling. He can make his instrument communicate exactly what he wishes it to, whether he is criticizing the tragedies of Shakespeare, or wandering through Oxford in the vacation, or describing a poor relation. His language can be as sumptuous and sonorous as Milton or as simple as Steele, and his power of enlarging his effects with the subtleties and suggestion of quotation and allusion might be compared with the modern master of that art, Mr. T. S. Eliot.

There are very few essayists whose creation of personality can be spoken of in the same breath with Lamb. Some create mannerisms by which we recognize them easily, some—Macaulay and Pater and G. K. Chesterton, for example—have a peculiar character of mind which stamps everything they write and gives it a vitality of its own, but that is not the same thing as the creative egotism of the pure essayist.

The only modern writer who touches that particular quality is Max Beerbohm. His essays have not the width and variety of Lamb; he has none of Lamb's vast reading, his marrowy meditative vein, his direct humanity. He is detached, sophisticated in his simplicity, sly and very quiet in his humor and wit. The unity of his work is not the unifying of a wide diversity of moods into one personality, but rather the unifying of a whole personality into a single mood. The tone of his voice never changes, but it is an individual voice of great polish and distinction.

It must, I think, be noticeable to all readers, that the more the essay tends towards biography, autobiography, or fiction, the better we are pleased. It is such passages which seem to insist on being quoted when one seeks for illustrations. The pure exploitation of personality is a ticklish business. As Montaigne says:

'Tis a rugged road, more so than it seems, to follow a pace so rambling and uncertain, as that of the soul; . . . to choose and lay hold of so many little nimble motions.

The soul, indeed, is so elusive and so difficult to capture in words that it almost always escapes, and either leaves the mind to comment, or has its place taken by a trivial and wordy egotism. The mind produces articles and treatises and critical essays which

appeal to other minds and provide intellectual stimulus, but a second-rate egotism produces that most tedious of all poor literature—the poor essay. And the fact that the average reader does, undoubtedly, find essays in general dull reading, leads us to an inescapable conclusion: the conclusion that the essay does not today satisfy many of the needs which literature does satisfy, or at any rate does not satisfy them nearly so well as either biography or fiction.



*How I Write Biography*



## IV

### *How I Write Biography*<sup>1</sup>

HAROLD NICOLSON

I HAVE BEEN INVITED BY the *Saturday Review* to describe my personal experience of biography. I have been asked, more specifically, to divulge those influences which determined my choice of subject, sources, and material; to explain the methods by which I worked; and to discuss how the ensuing book corresponded to my own view of history and to my general philosophy of life. It was suggested at the same time that I should take one particular book as an illustration of my argument. What was required was not an article upon the general principles of biography so much as a confession of my own practice and experience in that ungentle art. I shall respond to that invitation as obediently as I can.

My first difficulty is that my biographical work has been of different kinds. I confess, indeed, that I have

---

<sup>1</sup>From the *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 26, 1934. Used by permission of the author and the *Saturday Review of Literature*.



never written a "pure" biography, in the sense that I have never written the life of an individual conceived solely as a work of art. I have thus written studies of Verlaine, Tennyson, and Swinburne which, although they contained much biographical material, were in fact attempts at literary criticism. My *Byron: The Last Journey*, although more strictly biographical than the three books above mentioned, dealt only with the last twelve months of the poet's lifetime. *Some People* was an experiment in the most impure form of biography, namely, that of biographical fiction. And in my other books, such as *Portrait of a Diplomatist* and my more recent *Curzon: The Last Phase*, my aim has been, not merely to paint the portrait of an individual, but also to record more than half a century of diplomatic history.

The above explanation, egoistic though it may seem, is essential to what follows. One day I hope to write a "pure" biography and to concentrate upon describing the life and character of an individual from every angle and with no purpose other than such a description. As yet, however, I have never written a "pure" biography and am therefore but an ill-bred specimen of the biographer. It is with full consciousness of my mongrel origin that I write these confessions.

What, to begin with, really is biography? It is the

history of the life of an individual written as a branch of literature. As a history, it must be true. In that it describes an individual, it must be personal. And in that it is a branch of literature, it must be written with due regard to construction, balance, and style. The purely literary aspect is a question of personal temperament and taste. The problems of "truth" and "personality" are, however, the first two problems that the biographer has to face. As problems, they are far more difficult than they seem.

A biographer, for instance, is obliged, if he has any artistic conscience, to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Is he also obliged to tell the *whole* truth? It is obviously impossible for one person to tell the whole truth about another person, even if they have been intimately acquainted for several years. This particular problem does not, however, present itself to the biographer in its general aspect; it presents itself in the form of a concrete instance. In my researches, for instance, into the last year of Byron's life I came across certain documents which threw a wholly new light, not only upon Byron's character, but even upon the problem of his separation and departure from England. To have divulged this information would have created a sensation and have destroyed for many romantic people the picture they had formed of Byron's character. I decided

that I should make no use of this material except in so far as it colored and confirmed my own estimate of Byron's strangely complicated temperament. I think I was right in so doing, and I should justify my action upon the following biographical principle, listed under the heading of "Truth and the Whole Truth." My principle is as follows: "If a biographer discovers material which is so sensational and shocking that it will disturb, not only the average reader, but the whole proportions of his own work, then he is justified in suppressing the actual facts. He is not justified, however, in suppressing the conclusions which he himself draws from those facts, and he must alter his portrait so that it conforms to those facts." That is what I did in my treatment of Byron. Should some future research-worker come upon that same material he will recognize from my book that I also was in possession of that material, that it colored my interpretation of Byron's temperament, but that I suppressed the material itself for perfectly legitimate reasons.

The problem of "personality" again, while it is akin to the problem of "the whole truth," takes devious forms. A biographer, if he is to achieve a coherent portrait, is obliged to select certain qualities or defects in his subject to which he gives especial emphasis. If he be an honest biographer he will be scrupulously careful to secure that this selection, or

emphasis, is no distortion of the original. Yet not always will he find it easy to decide. A problem of this nature assailed me in my recent study of Lord Curzon which will shortly be published in the United States. Curzon was notoriously selfish in money matters, and there were occasions when he behaved, in matters of personal property, in a manner unworthy of a gentleman. I was perplexed as to how to handle this element in his character. Knowing him intimately, I was aware that it represented only one of his many eccentricities. Yet I was also aware that those who had not known him intimately would see the whole picture in a false proportion. I thus merely alluded to his marked acquisitive instincts and gave no illustrations of the extent to which those instincts were manifested in his daily life. Here again I claim that I was justified. It was not that I desired to whitewash Curzon; it was merely that I knew that this eccentric failing would upset the proportions of my portrait and thereby convey an actually false impression. In principle, it is a mistake to suppress any weaknesses in one's subject. But in practice the honest biographer will find that the cause of truth is better served by the suppression of details which are disconcerting to the reader and which would falsify the ultimate impression left upon his mind.

I have begun my confessions with these two prob-

lems of truth and personality since they form a necessary introduction to the first item in the examination set me, namely, "choice of subject." In many cases, of course, the subject of a biography is imposed by adventitious circumstances. I was induced to write a biography of my father, published in the United States under the title of *Portrait of a Diplomatist*, by obvious external considerations. When I had completed the book I was urged by friends to continue the thread of diplomatic history which it contained, and this led naturally to the second and third volumes of my trilogy on diplomatic history, namely, *Peacemaking* and *Curzon: The Last Phase*. In these three books, therefore, I did not, technically, "choose my subject." My study of Swinburne, also, was suggested to me from outside, and it may be for that reason that it is the worst book I have ever written. In regard to Verlaine, Tennyson, and Byron I did, however, "choose my subject," and I ought to be able to describe the motives which prompted this selection.

I remember well the genesis of my book on Verlaine, which was the first book I ever wrote. The Paris Peace Conference was drawing to its close, and one afternoon I walked back with Michael Sadler from the Quai d'Orsay. "I suppose," I said to him, "that it will all be rather flat when this is over. I have got so used to being overworked. What shall

I do with the leisure which will follow?" "You must write a book," he answered. The idea struck me as highly original. It happened that on the few occasions when I had managed to get away from the work of the Conference I had amused myself by visiting the sites which Verlaine had frequented, having for years been fascinated by the life and poetry of that eccentric genius. Inevitably the name of Verlaine suggested itself to me, and from that moment I began to accumulate more detailed material. Tennyson, in his turn, was suggested to me, mainly by the fact that I had always appreciated his poetry, but also by my irritation at finding that so few of my contemporaries had ever tried to read or understand the work of the greatest of our English Laureates. My aim was, as I stated, to "cut out the dead wood" from the dusty mass of the Tennysonian laurel clump, and to draw attention to his lyrical genius and to the true nature of his character. To Byron I was attracted, not only by personal sympathy, not merely by my own love of Greece, but also by the fact that the centenary of his death was rapidly approaching. Such, in so far as I can judge, were the motives which propelled me.

Yet if one is to say anything useful about this "choice of subject," mention must be made, not merely of the subjects chosen, but above all of those

rejected. For several months, for instance, I accumulated material and wasted heavy hours in a desire to write a biography of Pope. I abandoned the project since I found, as I came to know Pope more intimately, that he was, as a character, profoundly distasteful to me. There were but few points of sympathetic contact. On another occasion I started upon a biography of Anselm. Here again I abandoned the attempt, yet on this occasion it was not incompatibility of temper that deterred me, but lack of adequate knowledge. I realized that my ignorance of scholasticism rendered it impossible for me to write a life of any eleventh century Archbishop. A similar lack of topical knowledge prevented me from embarking recently upon a life of Benjamin Jowett,—a man with whom I had many contacts but not that essential one with the religious temperament of 1858.

What, therefore, has all this to do with choice of subject, with "truth" and "personality"? It has this to do. The biographer may decide on his subject either from personal predilection or owing to external circumstances. He will at once be brought up against the problems of "the whole truth" and "unpleasant sides of personality." Should he feel personally hostile, or unsympathetic, to his subject he will not resolve these problems in terms of a work of art. The distaste which he feels for his subject

may not cause him to violate the canons of truth and personality, but it will certainly induce him to violate the canons of art. He will incline, that is, to prefer the sensational to the integral. My rule, therefore, upon this vital question of choice of subject is "Never write a biography about anyone whom you personally dislike or from whose mental and topical atmosphere you are sundered either by prejudice or lack of knowledge."

Having chosen a congenial subject, the next step is one of study or research. It is a question of method. My own method is invariable. First, I buy an enormous notebook strongly bound. Secondly, I obtain from the library, or purchase for myself, the most comprehensive textbook upon my subject which I can find. I then number the pages of my notebook and prepare an index at the beginning. I then take the dates of birth and death of my hero and write out a table at the end showing exactly what age he had reached in any given year. Having done this, I start to summarize my textbook. The first page will be headed "heredity," the third "parents and childhood," the fifth "school and early influences," and so on throughout the man's career. On page 50 or so of the notebook will start the sections on character, which in their turn will be carefully indexed. Thus, page 50 might be headed



"epileptic tendency," page 51 "ambition," page 53 "selfishness," page 55 "sense of humor, lack of," and so on. All entries from the main textbook must be made in black ink: the right hand page is folded in half, leaving the left hand page a blank. By the time the main textbook has been annotated in this manner, the majority of the right hand pages will be filled if not with material, then at least with headings. The temptation to shirk these notes by taking them in the form of references must strongly be resisted. It is a mistake, for instance, to write on page 73 of one's notebook "for good story about his drinking see Havelock, Vol. II, page 353." Conversely, it is also a mistake to omit references which may be required later. The Havelock story must be summarized in your notebook and the salient passages quoted in inverted commas. At the end of the passage must appear the reference "Havelock, Vol. II, page 353." Only by such industrious methods can the material be properly digested, since, when, at a later stage, you begin actually to write the book, a mere reference will convey nothing to you, whereas to have to look up that reference a second time is a duplication of labor. Your main notebook must contain all the undigested material of the final work: it must not contain mere references to pages in other books.

Having read the main textbook, you must then purchase or acquire all the other books on the subject. According as you read these, you must insert the passages you may require to use on the right hand page of your notebook. If you have folded that page in half you will be able to insert the additional information exactly opposite the relevant passage from the main textbook. Having read all the published works upon your subject you then enter a further stage—that of original research.

If you are writing a biography of someone long dead this will be a delightful and impersonal labor. But if you are dealing with a man whose friends and relations are still alive you will be involved in difficulties. On the one hand is the desire to obtain hitherto unpublished material. On the other hand there is the conflict which will arise between “personal obligation” and truth. Let me define what I mean by “personal obligation.” When writing my book on Tennyson, for instance, I was offered the opportunity of obtaining from Tennyson’s son many unpublished papers. Knowing the religious veneration which the second Lord Tennyson retained for the memory of his father I rejected this opportunity. I was aware, in the second place, that were I to accept such material I should be placing myself under a “personal obligation” to the family

of the deceased and would in common decency be precluded from saying anything which might cause them pain. I solemnly warn the intending biographer against this common danger of his profession.

Another danger of research in the biography of the recently dead is the unreliability of human evidence. Much of one's information must of necessity be derived from oral evidence. Such evidence is often confidential and seldom trustworthy. When the book is published, other people write to the press accusing you of inaccuracy. Your only reply is to quote your authorities, who all too often refuse to be quoted. All oral evidence, even when it comes from your subject himself, must if possible be checked by reference to others.

Having completed your notebook, having read all published books and gathered all available evidence, the next thing to do is to take a short holiday. That holiday must be spent in visiting the localities identified with the subject of your biography. This delightful pilgrimage must always be deferred until the last moment. Only after you have amassed all possible information is it profitable to visit the scene of your drama. Any premature visit leads to subsequent regret. If you have journeyed prematurely from Cleveland to Aberdeen, it is irksome, on returning to Ohio, to come across a book which gives

you a whole new aspect of the Aberdeen period. No biography should ever be written unless the author has personally visited the places he describes; yet no biographer should visit these places until he has read and digested all possible material. His journey should be the breathing-space between the period of research and the period of writing.

On his return from this pilgrimage the biographer should settle down to his book. His first act will be to reread his notebook (which by that date should be a bulging portmanteau containing endless loose leaves inserted in their proper place and secured by a huge external band) and to block out the headings of his several chapters. He then starts to write—and from that moment I have no further advice to give him.

Such have been the methods which I have invariably followed. There is one question which remains. "How far," they ask me, "do your own books correspond to your philosophy of life and your view of history?" That is a question which it is impossible to answer. I should be much distressed were I to feel that my philosophy of life had become rigid and recognizable. That would indeed imply the arterio-sclerosis of later middle age. I should hesitate even to claim for myself a rigid view of history. Perhaps this very fluidity of conviction

implies an attitude towards life, or at least a state of mind. If there be any recurrent thesis in my biographical work I suppose it is this: "Human error is a constant, and not an incidental, factor in history. Everybody is an ass sometimes, and most people are asses all the time. Human will power is an intermittent factor, and history has been made more frequently at moments when people had no idea what they wanted than at those rarer moments when some individual wanted something definite. We are all straws upon the stream: yet if one observes those straws they do not all behave in exactly the same manner." Were I to define my philosophy of history I should, I suppose, define it in some such terms.

"But what," you will say, "is the stream?" And to that I answer: "I have no idea whatsoever; I know only that it is there. And the more interesting straws behave in a manner different from that adopted by the less interesting straws. My passion for biography arises from a desire to examine that difference."

*How I Write Short Stories*



## V

### *How I Write Short Stories*<sup>1</sup>

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

WHEN I BEGAN TO WRITE short stories I was fortunately in a position of decent independence, and I wrote them as a relief from work which I thought I had been too long concerned with. Most of them were written in groups from notes made as they occurred to me, and in each group I left naturally enough to the last those that seemed most difficult to write. A story is difficult to write when you do not know *all* about it from the beginning, but for part of it must trust to your imagination and experience. Sometimes the curve does not intuitively present itself and you have to resort to this method and that to get the appropriate line.

I beg the reader not to be deceived by the fact that a good many of my stories are told in the first person into thinking that they are experiences of my own.

---

<sup>1</sup>From *East and West*, by W. Somerset Maugham, copyright 1934, by the author, reprinted by permission from Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc. [These sections of the Preface to *East and West* appeared in this arrangement in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 28, 1934.]



This is merely a device to gain verisimilitude. It is one that has its defects, for it may strike the reader that the narrator could not know all the events he sets forth; and when he tells a story in the first person at one remove, when he reports, I mean, a story that someone tells him, it may very well seem that the speaker, a police officer, for example, or a sea-captain, could never have expressed himself with such facility and with such elaboration. Every convention has its disadvantages. These must be as far as possible disguised and what cannot be disguised must be accepted. The advantage of this one is its directness. It makes it possible for the writer to tell no more than he knows. Making no claim to omniscience, he can frankly say when a motive or an occurrence is unknown to him, and thus often give his story a plausibility that it might otherwise lack. It tends also to put the reader on intimate terms with the author. Since Maupassant and Chekhov, who tried so hard to be objective, nevertheless are so nakedly personal, it has sometimes seemed to me that if the author can in no way keep himself out of his work it might be better if he put in as much of himself as possible. The danger is that he may put in too much and thus be as boring as a talker who insists on monopolizing the conversation. Like all conventions this one must be used with discretion.

In early youth I had written a number of short stories, but for a long time, twelve or fifteen years at least, occupied with the drama I had ceased to do so; and when a journey to the South Seas unexpectedly provided me with themes that seemed to suit this medium, it was as a beginner of over forty that I wrote the story which is now called "Rain." Since it caused some little stir the reader of this Preface will perhaps have patience with me if I transcribe the working notes, made at the time, on which it was constructed. They are written in hackneyed and slipshod phrases, without grace; for nature has not endowed me with the happy gift of hitting instinctively upon the perfect word to indicate an object and the unusual, but apt, adjective to describe it. I was travelling from Honolulu to Pago Pago and, hoping they might at some time be of service, I jotted down, as usual, my impressions of such of my fellow-passengers as attracted my attention. This is what I said of Miss Thompson:

Plump, pretty in a coarse fashion, perhaps not more than twenty-seven. She wore a white dress and a large white hat, long white boots from which the calves bulged in cotton stockings.

There had been a raid on the Red Light district in Honolulu just before we sailed and the gossip of the

ship spread the report that she was making the journey to escape arrest. My notes go on:

*W. The Missionary.* He was a tall thin man, with long limbs loosely jointed, he had hollow cheeks and high cheek bones, his fine, large, dark eyes were deep in their sockets, he had full sensual lips, he wore his hair rather long. He had a cadaverous air and a look of suppressed fire. His hands were large, with long fingers, rather finely shaped. His naturally pale skin was deeply burned by the tropical sun. *Mrs. W. His Wife.* She was a little woman with her hair very elaborately done, New England; not prominent blue eyes behind gold-rimmed pince-nez, her face was long like a sheep's, but she gave no impression of foolishness, rather of extreme alertness. She had the quick movements of a bird. The most noticeable thing about her was her voice, high, metallic, and without inflection; it fell on the ear with a hard monotony, irritating to the nerves like the ceaseless clamor of a pneumatic drill. She was dressed in black and wore round her neck a gold chain from which hung a small cross. She told me that W. was a missionary on the Gilberts, and his district consisting of widely separated islands, he frequently had to go distances by canoe. During this time she remained at headquarters and managed the mission. Often the seas were very rough and the journeys were not without peril. He was a medical missionary. She spoke of the depravity of the natives in a voice which nothing could hush, but with a vehement, unctuous horror, telling me of their marriage customs which were obscene beyond description. She said, when first they went it was impossible to find a single good girl in any of the villages. She inveighed against dancing.

I talked with the missionary and his wife but once, and with Miss Thompson not at all. Here is the note for the story:

A prostitute, flying from Honolulu after a raid, lands at Pago Pago. There lands there also a missionary and his wife. Also the narrator. All are obliged to stay there owing to an outbreak of measles. The missionary finding out her profession persecutes her. He reduces her to misery, shame, and repentance, he has no mercy on her. He induces the governor to order her return to Honolulu. One morning he is found with his throat cut by his own hand and she is once more radiant and self-possessed. She looks at men and scornfully exclaims: dirty pigs.

The reader may have observed that in the original note of "Rain" the narrator was introduced, but in the story as written omitted. "Rain" was invented by the accident of my happening upon persons here and there, who in themselves or from something I heard about them, suggested a theme that seemed suitable for a short story. This brings me to a topic that has always concerned writers and that has at times given the public, the writers' raw material, some uneasiness. There are authors who state that they never have a living model in mind when they create a character. I think they are mistaken. They are of this opinion because they have not scrutinized with sufficient care the recollections and impressions upon

which they have constructed the person who, they fondly imagine, is of their invention. If they did they would discover that, unless he was taken from some book they had read, a practice by no means uncommon, he was suggested by one or more persons they had at one time known or seen. The great writers of the past made no secret of the fact that their characters were founded on living people. We know that the good Sir Walter Scott, a man of the highest principles, portrayed his father, with sharpness first and then, when the passage of years had changed his temper, with tolerance; Henri Beyle, in the manuscript of at least one of his novels, has written in at the side the names of the real persons who were his models; and this is what Turgenev himself says: "For my part, I ought to confess that I never attempted to create a type without having, not an idea, but a living person, in whom the various elements were harmonized together, to work from. I have always needed some groundwork on which I could tread firmly."

With Flaubert it is the same story; that Dickens used his friends and relations freely is notorious; and if you read the *Journal of Jules Renard*, a most instructive book to anyone who wishes to know how a writer works, you will see the care with which he set down every little detail about the habits, ways of

speech and appearance, of the persons he knew. When he came to write a novel he made use of this storehouse of carefully collected information. In Chekhov's diary you will find notes which were obviously made for use at some future time, and in the recollections of his friends there are frequent references to the persons who were the originals of certain of his characters. It looks as though the practice were very common. I should have said it was necessary and inevitable. Its convenience is obvious. You are much more likely to depict a character who is a recognizable human being, with his own individuality, if you have a living model. The imagination can create nothing out of the void. It needs the stimulus of sensation. The writer whose creative faculty has been moved by something peculiar in a person (peculiar perhaps only to the writer) falsifies his idea if he attempts to describe that person other than as he sees him. Character hangs together and if you try to throw people off the scent, by making a short man tall for example (as though stature had no effect on character), or by making him choleric when he has the concomitant traits of an equable temper, you will destroy the plausible harmony (to use the beautiful phrase of Baltasar Gracian) of which it consists. The whole affair would be plain sailing if it were not for the feel-

ings of the persons concerned. The writer has to consider the vanity of the human race and the Schadenfreude which is one of its commonest and most detestable failings. A man's friends will find pleasure in recognizing him in a book and though the author may never even have seen him will point out to him, especially if it is unflattering, what they consider his living image. Often someone will recognize a trait he knows in himself or a description of the place he lives in and in his conceit jumps to the conclusion that the character described is a portrait of himself. Thus in my story called "The Outstation" the Resident was suggested by a British Consul I had once known in Spain and it was written ten years after his death, but I have heard that the Resident of a district in Sarawak, which I described in the story, was much affronted because he thought I had had him in mind. The two men had not a trait in common. I do not suppose any writer attempts to draw an exact portrait.

Nothing, indeed, is so unwise as to put into a work of fiction a person drawn line by line from life. His values are all wrong, and, strangely enough, he does not make the other characters in the story seem false, but himself. He never convinces. That is why the many writers who have been attracted by the singular and powerful figure of the late Lord Northcliffe have

never succeeded in presenting a credible personage. The model a writer chooses is seen through his own temperament and if he is a writer of any originality what he sees need have little relation with the facts. He may see a tall one short or a generous one avaricious; but, I repeat, if he sees him tall, tall he must remain. He takes only what he wants of the living man. He uses him as a peg on which to hang his own fancies. To achieve his end (the plausible harmony that nature so seldom provides) he gives him traits that the model does not possess. He makes him coherent and substantial. The created character, the result of imagination founded on fact, is art, and life in the raw, as we know, is of this only the material.

The odd thing is that when the charge is made that an author has copied this person or the other from life, emphasis is laid only on the less praiseworthy characteristics of the victim. If you say of a character that he is kind to his mother, but beats his wife, everyone will cry: Ah, that's Brown, how beastly to say he beats his wife; and no one thinks for a moment of Jones and Robinson who are notoriously kind to their mothers. I draw from this the somewhat surprising conclusion that we know our friends by their vices and not by their virtues. I have stated that I never even spoke to Miss Thompson in "Rain." This is a character that the world has not found wanting



in vividness. Though but one of a multitude of writers my practice is doubtless common to most, so that I may be permitted to give another instance of it. I was once asked to meet at dinner two persons, a husband and wife, of whom I was told only what the reader will shortly read. I think I never knew their names. I should certainly not recognize them if I met them in the street. Here are the notes I made at the time:

A stout, rather pompous man of fifty, with pince-nez, gray-haired, a florid complexion, blue eyes, a neat gray moustache. He talks with assurance. He is resident of an outlying district and is somewhat impressed with the importance of his position. He despises the men who have let themselves go under the influence of the climate and the surroundings. He has travelled extensively during his short leaves in the East and knows Java, the Philippines, the coast of China and the Malay Peninsula. He is very British, very patriotic; he takes a great deal of exercise. He has been a very heavy drinker and always took a bottle of whiskey to bed with him. His wife has entirely cured him and now he drinks nothing but water. She is a little insignificant woman, with sharp features, thin, with a sallow skin and a flat chest. She is very badly dressed. She has all the prejudices of an Englishwoman. All her family for generations have been in second-rate regiments. Except that you know that she has caused her husband to cease drinking entirely you would think her quite colorless and unimportant.

On these materials I invented a story which is called "Before the Party." I do not believe that any candid person could think that these two people had cause for complaint because they had been made use of. It is true that I should never have thought of the story if I had not met them, but anyone who takes the trouble to read it will see how insignificant was the incident (the taking of the bottle to bed) that suggested it and how differently the two chief characters have in the course of writing developed from the brief sketch which was their foundation.

"Critics are like horse-flies which prevent the horse from ploughing," said Chekhov. "For over twenty years I have read criticisms of my stories, and I do not remember a single remark of any value or one word of valuable advice. Only once Skabichevsky wrote something which made an impression on me. He said I would die in a ditch, drunk." He was writing for twenty-five years and during that time his writing was constantly attacked. I do not know whether the critics of the present day are naturally of a less ferocious temper; I must allow that on the whole the judgment that has been passed on my own stories when from time to time a collection has been published in book form has been favorable. One epithet, however, has been much applied to them, which has puzzled me; they have been described with discon-

certing frequency as "competent." Now on the face of it I might have thought this laudatory, for to do a thing competently is certainly more deserving of praise than to do it incompetently, but the adjective has been used in a disparaging sense and, anxious to learn and if possible to improve, I have asked myself what was in the mind of the critics who thus employed it. Of course none of us is liked by everybody and it is necessary that a man's writing, which is so intimate a revelation of himself, should be repulsive to persons who are naturally antagonistic to the creature he is. This should leave him unperturbed. But when an author's work is fairly commonly found to have a quality that is unattractive to many people it is sensible of him to give the matter his attention. There is evidently something that a number of people do not like in my stories and it is this they try to express when they damn them with the faint praise of competence. I have a notion that it is the definiteness of their form. I hazard the suggestion (perhaps unduly flattering to myself) because this particular criticism has never been made in France where my stories have had with the critics and the public much greater success than they have had in England.

The French, with their classical sense and their orderly minds, demand a precise form and are exasperated by a work in which the ends are left lying

about, themes are propounded and not resolved and a climax is foreseen and then eluded. This precision on the other hand has always been slightly antipathetic to the English. Our great novels have been shapeless and this, far from disconcerting their readers, has given them a sense of security. This is the life we know, they have thought, with its arbitrariness and inconsequence; we can put out of our minds the irritating thought that two and two make four. If I am right in this surmise I can do nothing about it and I must resign myself to being called competent for the rest of my days. My prepossessions in the arts are on the side of law and order. I like a story that fits. I did not take to writing stories seriously till I had had much experience as a dramatist, and this experience taught me to leave out everything that did not serve the dramatic value of my story. It taught me to make incident follow incident in such a manner as to lead up to the climax I had in mind. I am not unaware of the disadvantages of this method. It gives a tightness of effect that is sometimes disconcerting. You feel that life does not dovetail into its various parts with such neatness. In life stories straggle, they begin nowhere and tail off without a point. That is probably what Chekhov meant when he said that stories should have neither a beginning nor an end. It is certain that sometimes it gives

a sensation of airlessness when you see persons who behave so exactly according to character, and incidents that fall into place with such perfect convenience. The story-teller of this kind aims not only at giving his own feelings about life, but at a formal decoration. He arranges life to suit his purposes. He follows a design in his mind, leaving out this and changing that; he distorts facts to his advantage, according to his plan; and when he attains his object produces a work of art. He seeks to prove nothing. He paints a picture and sets it before you. You can take it or leave it.

*The Secret Garden*



## VI

### *The Secret Garden*<sup>1</sup>

EDITH WHARTON

I HAVE HESITATED FOR SOME time before beginning this article, since any attempt to analyze work of one's own doing seems to imply that one regards it as likely to be a lasting interest, and I wish at the outset to repudiate any such assumption. Every artist works, like the Gobelins weavers, on the wrong side of the tapestry, and if now and then he comes around to the right side, and catches what seems a happy glow of color, or a firm sweep of design, he must instantly retreat again, if encouraged yet still uncertain; and once the work is done, and he hopes to contemplate it dispassionately, the result of his toil too often presses on his tired eyes with the nightmare weight of a cinema "close-up."

Nevertheless, no picture of myself would be more than a profile if it failed to give some account of the teeming visions which, ever since my small-childhood,

---

<sup>1</sup> From *A Backward Glance*. Copyright 1933, 1934 by D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc. Used by permission of the author and D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc. [First printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1933, as "Confessions of a Novelist."]



and even at the busiest and most agitated periods of my outward life, have incessantly peopled my inner world. I have decided, therefore, to try to describe, as simply as I can, what seems to have gone to the making of my books; and there is the more reason for doing this because so few writers seem to have watched themselves while they wrote, or, if they did, to have set down their observations. Not a few painters have painted themselves at their easels, but I can think of nothing corresponding to these self-confessions in the world of letters, or at any rate of fiction, except the prefaces of Henry James. These, however, in the main are analyses of the way in which he focused a given subject and of the technical procedure employed, once he had determined his angle of vision. Even that beautiful and deeply moving fragment, the appeal to his genius, the knowledge of which we owe to Mr. Percy Lubbock's vigilance, is an invocation to the goddess and not a detached objective notation of her descent into his soul.

What I mean to try for is the observation of that strange moment when the vaguely adumbrated characters whose adventures one is preparing to record are suddenly *there*, themselves, in the flesh, in possession of one, and in command of one's voice and hand. It is there that the central mystery lies, and perhaps it is as impossible to fix in words as that other mystery

of what happens in the brain at the precise moment when one falls over the edge of consciousness into sleep.

As for the rest of my colleagues, especially among English and American novelists, my impression is that the deeper processes of their art do not greatly interest them, or even arrest their attention; their conscious investigations of method seldom seem to go deeper than syntax, and it is immeasurably deeper that the vital interest begins. Therefore I shall try to say something of the growth and unfolding of the plants in my secret garden, from the seed to the shrub-top—for heaven forbid that I should try to magnify my vegetation into trees!

## II

When I first began to talk with novelists about the art of fiction I was amazed at the frequently repeated phrase, "I've been hunting about for months for a good subject." Hunting about for a subject! Good heavens! I remember once, when an old friend of the pen made this rather wistful complaint, carelessly rejoining: "Subjects? But they swarm about me like mosquitoes! I'm sick of them: they stifle me. I wish I could get rid of them!" And only years afterward, when I had learned more from both life and letters,

did I understand how presumptuous such an answer must have sounded. The truth is that I have never attached much importance to subject, partly because every incident, every situation, about me is perpetually presenting itself to me in the light of story-telling material, and partly from the conviction that the possibilities of a given subject are—whatever a given imagination can make of them. But by the time I had written three or four novels I had learned to keep silence on this point.

The examination of the story-telling process may be divided into two parts: that which concerns the technique of fiction (in the widest sense), and that which tries to investigate what, for want of a simpler term, one must call by the old Bardic name of inspiration. On the subject of technique I have found only two novelists explicitly and deeply interested—Henry James and Paul Bourget. I have talked long and frequently with both of them, and profitably also, I hope, though on certain points we always disagreed. I have also, to the best of my ability, analyzed this process, as I understood it, in my book, *The Writing of Fiction*; and therefore I shall deal here, not with any general theory of technique, but simply with the question of how some of my own novels happened to me, how each little volcanic island shot up from the unknown depths, or each coral atoll slowly built

itself out of them. But first I will try to capture the elusive moment of the arrival of the characters.

In the birth of fiction, it is sometimes the situation, the "case," which first presents itself to the mind, and sometimes the characters who first appear, asking to be fitted into a situation. I have often speculated on the conditions likely to give the priority to one or the other, but I doubt if fiction can be usefully divided into novels of situation and of character, since a novel, if worth anything at all, is always both at once, in inextricable combination. I can only say that in my own case a situation sometimes occurs to me first, and in others a single figure suddenly walks into my mind. If the situation takes the lead, I leave it lying about, as it were, in a quiet place, and just wait till the characters creep stealthily up and wriggle themselves into it. All I seem to have done is to say, at the outset: "This thing happened—but to whom?" Then I wait, holding my breath, and one by one they appear and take possession of the case. When it befalls in the other way, I may be strolling about casually in my mind, and suddenly a character will start up before me, coming seemingly from nowhere; and again, but more breathlessly, I watch; and presently the character draws nearer, and seems to become aware of me, and to feel the shy but desperate need to unfold his or her tale. I cannot say in

which way my subject will probably present itself—though perhaps in short stories the situation, in novels one of the characters, is most likely to appear first.

This, however, is not the most interesting point of the adventure. Compared with what follows it is not interesting at all, though it has, in my case, one odd feature I have not heard of elsewhere—that is, that my characters always appear with their names. Sometimes these names seem to me affected, sometimes almost ridiculous; but I am obliged to own that they are never fundamentally unsuitable. And the proof that they are not, that they really belong to the people, is the difficulty which arises when I try to substitute other names. For many years the attempt always ended fatally; any character I unchristened instantly died on my hands, as if it were some kind of sensitive crustacean, and the name it bore were its shell. Only very gradually, and in very few cases, have I gained enough mastery over them to be able to effect the change, and even now, when I do, I have to resort to *piqures* and oxygen, and not always successfully.

These names are hardly ever what I call “real names”—that is, the current patronymics one would find in an address book or a telephone directory; and often it is their excessive oddness which makes me try

to change them. When in a book by someone else I meet people called by current names I always say to myself, "Ah, those names were tied on afterward"; and I often find that the characters thus labeled are less living than the others. Yet there seems to be no general rule, for, in the case of certain famous novelists whose characters have out-of-the-way names, many are tied on too. Balzac had to hunt the streets of Paris for names on shop signs; and Thackeray and Trollope bent their genius to the invention of the most labored and dreary pleasantries in the pointless attempt to characterize their people in advance. Yet Captain Deuceace and the Rev. Mr. Quiverful are alive enough, and I can only suppose that the oddity of the prenamed characters is a peculiarity of my own mental make-up. But I often wonder how the novelist whose people arrive without names manages to establish relations with them!

## III

A still more spectral element in my creative life is the sudden appearance of names without characters. Several times, in this way, a name to which I can attach no known association of ideas has forced itself upon me in a furtive shadowy way, not succeeding in making its bearer visible, yet hanging about obsti-

nately for years in the background of my thoughts. The Princess Estradina was such a name. I knew nothing of its origin, and still less of the invisible character to whom it presumably belonged. Who was she, what were her nationality, her history, her claims upon my attention? She must have been there, lurking and haunting me, for years before she suddenly walked into *The Custom of the Country*, in high-colored flesh and blood, cool, dominant, and thoroughly at home.

Another such character haunts me today. Her name is still odder—Laura Testvalley. How I should like to change that name! But it has been attached for some time now to a strongly outlined material form, the form of a character figuring largely in an adventure I know all about, and have long wanted to relate. Several times I have tried to give my character another name, since the one she bears, should it ever appear in print, will be even more troublesome to my readers than to me; but Miss Testvalley is strong-willed, and even obstinate, and turns sulky and unmanageable whenever I try to hint at the advantages of a change; so it is more than likely that she will one day force her way into my tale burdened with her impossible patronymic.

But this is a mere parenthesis; what I want to try to hint at is the elusive moment when these people

who haunt my brain actually begin to speak within me with their own voices. The situating of my tale, and its descriptive and narrative portions, I am conscious of conducting, though often unaware of how the story first came to me, pleading to be told; but when the dialogue begins, then I become merely a recording instrument, and my hand never hesitates because my mind has not to choose, but only to set down what these stupid or intelligent, lethargic or passionate, people say to each other in a language, and with arguments, that appear to be all their own. It is for this reason that I attach such importance to dialogue, and yet regard it as an effect to be so sparingly used. For by dialogue I do not mean the pages of "Yes" and "No," of platitudes and repetitions, of which most actual talk is composed, and which any writer with a photographic mind and a good memory can set down by the yard. The vital dialogue is that exchanged by characters whom their creator has really vitalized, and only the significant passages of their talk should be recorded, in high relief against the narrative, and not uselessly embedded in it.

In my case these moments of high tension, when the creature lives and its creator listens to it, have nothing to do with the "walking away with the subject," the "settling it in their own way," with which some novelists so oddly charge their characters. It



is a necessity to me that the note of inevitableness should be sounded at the very opening of my tale, and that my characters should go forward to their ineluctable doom like the "murdered man" in *The Pot of Basil*. From the first I know exactly what is going to happen to every one of them; their fate is settled beyond rescue, and I have but to watch and record. When I read that great geniuses like Dickens and Trollope "killed off" a character, or changed the conclusion of a tale, in response to the request or the criticism of a reader, I am dumbfounded. What then was their own relation to their subject? But to show how mysterious and incalculable the whole business is, one has only to remember that Trollope "went home and killed" Mrs. Proudie because he had overheard some fool at his club complaining that she had lived long enough; and yet that the death scene thus arbitrarily brought about is one of the greatest pages he ever wrote, and places him momentarily on a level with Balzac and Tolstoy!

But these people of mine, whose ultimate destiny I know, walk to it by ways unrevealed to me beforehand. Not only their speech, but what I might call their subsidiary action, seems to be their very own, and I am sometimes startled at the dramatic effect of a word or gesture which would never have occurred to me if I had been pondering over an abstract

"situation," as yet uninhabited by its "characters."

I do not think I can get any nearer than this to the source of my story-telling faculty; I can only say that the process, though it takes place in some secret region on the sheer edge of consciousness, is yet always illuminated by the clear light of my critical attention. What happens there is as real and as tangible as my encounters with my friends and neighbors, often more so, though it is entirely different in quality. It produces in me a great emotional excitement, quite unrelated to the joy or sorrow caused by real happenings, but as intense, and with as great an appearance of reality; and my two lives, divided between these equally real yet totally unrelated worlds, have gone on thus, side by side, equally absorbing, but wholly isolated from each other, ever since in my infancy I "read stories" aloud to myself out of Washington Irving's *Alhambra*, which I generally held upside down.

#### IV

After writing *The Valley of Decision*, and my book on Italian villas, I felt that I had said my say about Italy, and the idea of attempting a novel of contemporary life in New York began to fascinate me. Still, I hesitated. *The Valley of Decision* was not

(in my sense of the term) a novel at all, but only a romantic chronicle, unrolling its episodes like the frescoed legends on the palace walls of its background; my idea of a novel was something very different, something far more compact and centripetal, and I doubted whether I should ever acquire enough constructive power to achieve anything beyond isolated character studies, or the stringing together of picturesque episodes. But my mind was full of my new subject, and, whatever else I was about, I went on, in Tyndall's brooding phrase, trying to "look into it till it became luminous."

Fate had planted me in New York, and it was always my instinct as a story-teller to use the material nearest to hand, and most familiarly my own. Novelists of my generation must have noticed, in recent years, as one of the unforeseen results of "crowd-mentality" and the general habit of standardizing, that the modern critic requires every novelist to treat the same kind of subject, and relegates to insignificance the author who declines to conform. At present the demand is that only the man with the dinner pail shall be deemed worthy of attention, and fiction is classed according to its degree of conformity to this rule.

There could be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to *what it ought to have been*

*about.* The bigger the imagination, the more powerful the intellectual equipment, the more different subjects will come within the novelist's reach; and Balzac spread his net over nearly every class and situation in the French social system. As a matter of fact, there are only two essential rules: one, that the novelist should deal only with what is within his reach, literally or figuratively (in most cases the two are synonymous), and the other that the value of a subject depends almost wholly on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see into it. Almost—but not quite; for there are certain subjects too shallow to yield anything to the most searching gaze. I had always felt this, and now my problem was how to make use of a subject—fashionable New York—which, of all others, seemed most completely to fall within the condemned category. There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy, and should not have to get it up out of notebooks and encyclopædias—and yet!

The problem, of course, was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's excuse for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure seekers be said to have, on the "old

woe of the world," any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer to my musings was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.

Once I had understood that, the tale rushed on toward its climax. I already had definite ideas as to how any given subject should be viewed, and from what angle approached; my trouble was that the story kept drawing into its web so many subordinate themes that to show their organic connection with the main issue, yet keep them from crowding to the front, was a staggering task for a beginner.

## v

The novel was already promised to *Scribner's Magazine*, but no date had been fixed for its delivery, and between my critical dissatisfaction with the work, and the distractions of a busy and hospitable life, full of friends and travel, reading and gardening, I had let the months drift by without really tackling my subject. And then, suddenly, my friend Mr. Burlingame, then the editor of *Scribner's*, came to my rescue by asking me to come to his. It was found that

a novel which was to have preceded mine would not be ready in time, and I was asked to replace it. The first chapters of my tale would have to appear almost at once, and it must be completed within four or five months! I have always been a slow worker, and was then a very inexperienced one, and I was to be put to the severest test to which a novelist can be subjected: my novel was to appear in print, and be exposed to public comment, before I had worked it out to its climax. What that climax was to be I had known before I began; nor have I ever understood the mental state of the novelist who starts out without knowing where or how he will end. To me the last page is always latent in the first, but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write; and now I was asked to gallop over them before I had even traced them out! I had expected to take at least another year or eighteen months to complete my tale, instead of which I was asked to have it ready within six months, and nothing short of "the hand of God" must be suffered to interrupt my labors, since my first chapters would already be in print!

I hesitated for a day, and then accepted, and buckled down to my task; and I can only say that, of all the friendly turns that Mr. Burlingame ever did me, his exacting this effort was the most helpful. Not only did it give me what I most lacked,—self-confi-

dence,—but it bent me to the discipline of the daily task, that inscrutable “inspiration of the writing table” which Baudelaire, most wayward and nerve-racked of geniuses, proclaimed as insistently as Trollope. When the first chapters began to appear, I had written hardly fifty thousand words; but I kept at it, and finished and delivered my novel at the date appointed.

To be turned from a drifting amateur into a professional was a great advance; but it was as nothing compared to the effect on my imagination of a systematic daily effort. I was really like the servant who went out to find an ass, and came back with a kingdom—the kingdom of mastery over my tools. I remember saying to myself, when the book was done: “I don’t yet know how to write a novel; *but I know how to find out how to.*”

From that day I went on trying systematically to exercise this faculty of “finding out how to”; but I wrote two or three novels without feeling that I had made much progress. It was not until I wrote *Ethan Frome* that I suddenly felt in full control of my *métier*, as an artisan should be of his tools. I mention this because, when *Ethan Frome* first appeared, I was severely criticized by the reviewers for what was considered the clumsy structure of the tale. I had pondered long on this structure, had felt its peculiar

difficulties, and possible awkwardness, but could think of no alternative which would serve as well in the given case; and though I am far from thinking *Ethan Frome* my best novel, and am bored and even exasperated when I am told that it is, I am still sure that its structure is not its weak point.

From that day until now I have always felt that I had my material fairly well in hand, though so often, alas, I am conscious that the strange beings who have commissioned me to tell their story are not satisfied with the portraits I have drawn of them. I think it was Sargent who said that, when a portrait was submitted to the sitter's family, the comment of the latter was always: "There's something wrong about the mouth."

It is the same with my sitters; though they are free to talk and even to behave in their own way, the image of them reflected in my pages is often, I fear, wavering, or at least blurred. "There is something wrong about the mouth"—and the great masters of portraiture, Balzac, Tolstoy, Thackeray, Trollope, have neglected to tell us how they not only "caught the likeness," but carried it on, in all its flesh-and-blood actuality and changefulness, to the very last page.



## VI

All novelists who describe (whether from without or within) what is called "society life" are pursued by the idiotic accusation of putting "real people" (that is, persons actually known to the author) into their books. Anyone gifted with the least creative faculty knows how utterly beside the mark such an accusation is. "Real people" transported into a work of the imagination would instantly cease to be real; only those born of the creator's brain can give the least illusion of reality. But it is hopeless to persuade the unimaginative—who make up the bulk of novel readers—that to introduce real people into a novel would be exactly like gumming their snapshots into the vibrating human throng in a Guardi picture. If one did, they would be the only dead and unreal objects in a scene quivering with life. The low order, in fiction, of the genuine *roman à clef* (which is never written by a born novelist) naturally makes any serious writer of fiction indignant at being suspected of such methods. Nothing can be more exasperating to the creative writer than to have a clumsy finger point at one of the beings born in that mysterious other-world of invention, with the arch accusation. "Of course we all recognize your Aunt Eliza!" or to be

told (and this has more than once happened to me), "We all thought your heroine must be meant for Mrs. X, *because their hair is exactly the same color.*"

Of what, then, are the mysterious creatures compounded who come to life (sometimes) under the novelist's pen? Well, it would be insincere to deny that there are bits of Aunt Eliza in this one, of Mrs. X in that—though in the case of Mrs. X it is hardly likely that the psychological novelist would use the color of her hair as a mark of identity, and more than probable that the bits of Mrs. X which have actually served him are embedded in some personage where the reader alive only to outward signs would never think of seeking them. The process is, in fact, inexplicable enough to the author, and doubly so to his readers. No "character" can be made out of nothing, still less can it be successfully pieced together out of heterogeneous scraps of the "real," like dismembered statues of which the fragments have been hopelessly mixed up by the restorer.

The process is more like that by which sham Tanagra statuettes used, I am told, to be manufactured for the unsuspecting collector. The experts having discovered that ancient terra cotta acquires, through long burial, a peculiar flavor, were in the habit of testing the genuineness of the piece by *tasting it*; and

the forgers, discovering this, ground fragments of old Tanagras into powder, ran the powder into one of the old moulds, and fearlessly presented the result as an antique. Experience, observation, the looks and ways and words of "real people," all melted and fused in the white heat of the creative fires—such is the mingled stuff which the novelist pours into the firm mould of his narrative. And yet it must be owned that this does not wholly solve the problem either; in reality, it is only a step or two nearer the truth than the exasperating attributions of the simple-minded. . . .

These attributions are exasperating, no doubt; but they are less so because of the accidental annoyance that may result in a given case than because they bring home to the creator, each time with a fresh shock, the general lack of imaginative response to his effort. It is discouraging to know that the books into the making of which so much of one's soul has entered will be snatched at by readers curious only to discover which of the heroes and heroines of the "society column" are to be found in it. But I long ago made up my mind that it is foolish and illogical to resent even such a puerile form of criticism. If one has sought the publicity of print, and sold one's wares in the open market, one has sold to the purchasers of one's books the right to think what they choose about them; and the novelist's best safeguard is to try to put

out of his mind the quality of the praise or blame likely to be meted out to him by reviewers and readers, and to write only for that dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast.



## *Heroes and Monsters*



## VII

### *Heroes and Monsters*<sup>1</sup>

ELLEN GLASGOW

THIRTY YEARS AGO, I OBJECTED to the evasive idealism in American novels. Nowadays, I object to the aimless violence. Not that I oppose either evasiveness or violence as material for fiction, provided the whole cloth is not cut, as dress-makers say, on the bias, and draped round a lay figure in a uniform style. But whenever I watch the professional rebels against gentility basking in that lurid light so fashionable at present among the genteel, I remember with a smile the local thunder-storm that followed my first modest effort to overturn a literary convention.

Thus it occurs to me that the flavor of plain truth, culled from long and sometimes bitter experience, may not be unwholesome today. For of all the weeds that grow and run wild in Southern soil, plain truth is the most difficult to serve without sauce. More-

---

<sup>1</sup>From *What Is a Book?* Edited by Dale Warren. Used by permission of the author and Houghton Mifflin Company. [Printed in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 4, 1935.]



over, there does not exist in the South today, nor has there ever existed at any time, a treatment of truth in fiction so plain and broad that it could be called, with fairness, a school of realism. There are, no doubt, a few scattered realists, as lonely as sincerity in any field, who dwell outside the Land of Fable inhabited by fairies and goblins. But goblins are as unreal as fairies; and beneath the red paint and charcoal, Raw-Head-and-Bloody-Bones is our battered old friend, Jack-the-Giant-Killer. We remain incurably romantic. Only a puff of smoke separates the fabulous Southern hero of the past from the fabulous Southern monster of the present—or the tender dreams of James Lane Allen from the fantastic nightmares of William Faulkner.

So I shall pass on while I toss a magnolia blossom to those intrepid novelists who have won fine Southern reputations in the North—the only climate, it appears, that has ever been favorable to Southern literary reputations. To confine myself to a few of the notable successes of the year, I congratulate Eleanor Carroll Chilton, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, Berry Fleming, Hamilton Basso. I welcome Stark Young's glowing reaffirmation of courage in defeat. I salute Douglas Southall Freeman's superb life of Lee, which has restored not only pure biography to English letters, after a period

of wild oats and light living, but even the obsolete word "duty" to the American tongue. And nothing, I am persuaded, except perhaps a recovered faith in Santa Claus, could confer greater happiness on a liberated world than the miraculous resurrection of the sense of duty. In a sultry age, when we need the tonic of a bracing literature, character has become a lost quantity in fiction, and we miss the full, clear, commanding note of the disciplined mind. Our very vocabulary whines or blusters.

Turning from the formal traditions in Mr. Young's book, which is more sound history than sheer romance, to the inflamed rabble of impulses in the contemporary Southern novel, one asks immediately: What is left of the pattern? Has Southern life—or is it only Southern fiction—become one vast, disordered sensibility? Is there no Southern horizon beyond Joyce? Where is that "immoderate past" celebrated in Allen Tate's loyal "Ode to the Confederate Dead"; has "the salt of their blood" oozed away in a flicker of iridescent scum on the marshes? Does defeat always appear nobler than victory? Or is the whole tedious mass production of degeneracy in our fiction—the current literary gospel of futility and despair—merely a single symptom of the neuroses inflicted on its slaves by the conquering dynamo?

Already. I think, we have answered most of these

questions. Not the South alone, but the whole modern world, after its recent bold escape from superstition, is in fact trembling before its own shadow. We are trying to run away from our shadows under the delusion that we are running away from the past. But it is as useless to run away from the past as it is to run away from what we call life. Wherever we go, we still carry life, and that root of life which is the past, in our tribal memories, in our nerves, in our arteries. All we can do is to deny or distort the shifting semblance we know as reality. And so the fantasy of abominations has stolen the proud stilts of the romantics. To borrow Gerald W. Johnson's amusing expression, Southern fiction "comes stepping high," as of old, only it is now stepping over a bog instead of a battlefield. Farther away, beyond the authentic masters of horror, press and push the rows of ambitious amateurs, who imagine that they are realists because they have tasted a stew of spoilt meat. But it takes more than spoilt meat to make realism. It takes, among other attributes, a seasoned philosophy and a mature outlook on life.

For thirty years I have had a part in the American literary scene, either as a laborer in the vineyard or as a raven croaking on a bust of Pallas. In all these years I have found that the only permanent law in art, as in the social order, is the law of change. Al-

though it may be true that we cannot change human nature, history proves on every page, as John Chamberlain has reminded us, that we can and constantly do change human behavior. I have seen fashions in fiction and in behavior shift and alter and pass away while we watched them. I have seen reputations swell out and burst with wind and shrivel up into damp rags of India-rubber. I have seen, not without sardonic amusement, the balance of power in American letters pass from genteel mediocrity with hair on the face to truculent mediocrity with down on the chest.

For these and other reasons, the last position I would assume is that of the lone defender of the human species in modern fiction. I needed no peep at war to teach me that we live among evils. I needed no "planned economy" to prove to me that these evils are of our own making. It may be true, as our more popular novelists assure us, that we are doomed. It may be true that all is lost to us but moral and physical disintegration, and we should hasten out, while it is yet day, to gather in that rich literary harvest. This, I repeat, may be true. One may point to life and prove anything; it all depends on the pointing. And despair itself may be vital; it may be strong; it may be courageous; though only worms can survive the damp chill of negation. Few things, however, are

more certain than this:—the literature that crawls too long in the mire will lose at last the power of standing erect. On the farther side of deterioration lies the death of a culture.

But, even so, when the worst has been written, it is not an ignoble fate—it is not an unhappy fate—to go down still fighting against the inevitable. That is a triumph of the will, not a surrender; and if nothing pleasanter may be said of the inevitable, at least it is worth fighting. Whatever contemporary fiction may think of love, the world has shown from the beginning that it loves fighters. Nor is the impulse toward something better, or at least different, confined to humanity; it runs back and forth through all nature. We are too apt to forget that the earliest recorded conquest over destiny was achieved by a fish. Nowadays, while we puzzle over the human mass movement back into the slime, it is well to remind ourselves of our first revolutionary ancestor, that “insane fish,” so lovingly commemorated by James Branch Cabell, “who somehow evolved the idea that it was his duty to live on land, and eventually succeeded in doing it.” Surely that high exploit deserves a more appropriate memorial than sophisticated barbarism and the sentimental cult of corruption.

The revolutionary fish no longer leaps. Although the word Revolution is in the air, the true spirit is

wanting. Instead, we breathe in a suffocating sense of futility. That liberal hope of which we dreamed in my youth appears to have won no finer freedom than an age of little fads and the right to cry ugly words in the street. Not for whims like these do men unite and live or die happily. The true revolution may end in a ditch or in the shambles; but it must begin in the stars. There must be bliss, as Wordsworth found, in that dawn, "And human nature seeming born again."

I am not asking the novelist of the Southern Gothic school to change his material. The Gothic as Gothic, not as psuedo-realism, has an important place in our fiction. Besides, I know too well that the born novelist does not choose his subject; he is chosen by it. All I ask him to do is to deal as honestly with living tissues as he now deals with decay, to remind himself that the colors of putrescence have no greater validity for our age, or for any age, than have—let us say, to be very daring—the cardinal virtues. For, as a great modern philosopher has written: "An honorable end is the one thing that cannot be taken from a man."



## *Drama and the Weather*





## VIII

### *Drama and the Weather*<sup>1</sup>

PAUL GREEN

Chapel Hill, North Carolina,  
July 6, 1934.

DEAR MRS. ISAACS:

IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN DOWN in the country during a severe summer drought, you have noticed how the crops stood lifeless and how the leaves and limbs of the trees sagged under the wilting heat;—and how the chickens in the barnyard sat slothfully on the ground, and the cattle in the shadow of the buildings looked out at the world with dull and inert eyes. The farmers themselves seemed testy and irritable about the house, and with reason, for day after day the sun rises like a ball of fire, swims across the brazen empty sky and goes down beyond the rim of brown hills—a burning curse to animal, earth and man. The world itself is perishing for rain, but there is no rain.

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Theatre Arts Monthly*, August, 1934. Used by permission of the author and *Theatre Arts Monthly*.

Then one morning a different feeling is in the air. After breakfast you walk in the lane, and a change is over everything. The flowers and the trees have perked up their heads, the chickens step about lively, and the pigeons no longer quarrel under the eaves. Down in the pasture the cattle move briskly around biting off sweet willow tips, and the farmer and his sons are long ago abroad looking to their dikes and ditches. You go down to the village for the mail. More than once you hear a store loafer say, "The air feels like rain." Being a summer boarder, you read the morning papers, then an article or two in a magazine about trouble in Europe, and after lunch sit on the front porch and take a rest. Looking off across the heat-filled fields about two o'clock, you see low on the horizon edge a faint little wad of cloud, no larger than the cloud Elijah or Polonius saw. And as you sit there watching, another little cloud appears swimming up the sky, to be followed by another and then another. Soon the whole south-western horizon is marked by these little upboiling racks. And in less time than it takes to tell, a low dark swollen band begins shoving itself up above the line of sycamores along the river. Presently there is a roll of low ominous thunder below the earth, and the windows rattle in their sockets. The moments pass, the dark wide stretching cloud now reaches from north to south and

pushes up until it touches the edge of the burning sun. Then it obscures the sun. A flash of lightning marks a sudden fiery crack from sky to earth. The elm trees around the house shiver with a strange delight. The chickens start going into the henhouse and the doves fly into their cote. And then up from the meadow the old bell-cow comes leading the other cattle, her head high, her tail arched merrily. Another roll of thunder sounds, a gust of dust cuts a little jiggling whirlwind down the lane, trying to keep up with the swift edge of the cloud which now has raced across the sky and passed over the house. The wind blows more strongly, and somewhere a door slams. You continue to sit there, waiting for the rain to fall. The wind dies out, the thunder is no longer heard, nor is there any lightning. Everything is breathless, expectant, still. Now with a sudden clatter like stones on the roof the rain begins. A fine mist of dust is beat up in the yard, and in the lane and out across the fields. Like a morning ground-fog it is. And then it too is wetted down to earth as the rain settles into a steady pour. A sheet of wetness begins to blow in on you. You pick up your chair, lean it against the wall and enter the house. There you stand by the window looking out where a world is being refreshed and where a snake of yellow water has started wriggling down the dry road ditch. The

drought is over. In a few days everything will be green again.

And as with the rain so with writing a play—so with any work of art. It comes pretty much when it will come, is absent when it will be absent, and no man can provide its presence at his will. So if I may be personal in replying to your question, "Why do you write plays?" I can on first consideration easily say, "I don't know." It's much like the weather to me—the what and why, the wherefore and results. About the only answer I would venture is that I seem to need to. If I were certain that the drama were the one means of gaining honor or wealth or mental stability there would be some obvious common-sense in spending one's life trying to set down lines for people to speak on a stage. I believe I should want to write plays though if little or nothing came of them, but naturally I want a lot to come of them.

Of course your question goes further than any easy answer or any meteorological metaphor. It raises the whole problem of aptitude and calling. I think all people are by nature artists, that is more or less so. The usual European designation of the American builder and business man as a money hog, for instance—a creature who takes pleasure only in dollar profit and pain only in dollar loss—seems to me obviously false. There is more to it than that—always

more. Sinclair Lewis in his latest novel, *Work of Art*, tries his hand at showing that one Myron Weagle with his dream of a perfect hotel might be considered essentially an artist. There is a lot of human truth in his contention and it partly accounts for his book's being a best seller.

Now if all of us have this so-called artistic urge, then why do some of us become hotel-keepers and others banjo-pickers? The answer is perhaps that circumstances always play their part. One child happens to have access, say, to a piano on which he begins to give voice to his yearnings. Another has a piano near at hand but finds his fingers too stiff or too short ever to allow of his becoming a performer. Perhaps he turns to composing, or brick-laying. And so it goes. Each of us could make some sort of statement as to his proper calling. Take your own case—you run a drama magazine. All sorts of odds and ends of circumstances and people went into your choice of that career.

Two incidents happened to me years ago, I remember, which turned me to writing plays. Norman Foerster, who was one of the finest English teachers ever to appear at the University of North Carolina, announced in class one day that the seniors had decided to do a play at commencement and were holding a contest for original scripts. He advised me to

try my hand. I took a chance at the thing and happened to win out. The play was produced in the forest theatre and I was thrilled to death. After that though I didn't set my heart on playwriting, for I had always been more interested in poetry and short stories than anything else. Then in 1919 "Proff" Koch came riding in from the Dakota prairies, his arms full of plays and his head full of dreams. In no time a stage was up, and everybody near and far, little and big, black and white, realized for the first time that he was an artist of some sort—mainly a dramatic artist. Some went in for designing, some for acting, some for writing. I chose the last. And after a few productions I was caught fast in my choice and had struck acquaintance with all the terrors that inhabit the shadows of the stage like bats.

Your next question is easier to answer. "Why do you write the plays you do?" The answer is—that's the only kind I know how to write. Most of the plays I have written can be designated as folk plays, and I know this seems a narrow boundary. Perhaps it is, but since the "folk" are the people who seem to matter most to me, I have little interest in trying to deal with others who are more foreign and therefore less real. Not for a moment do I claim to have done justice to an inspiring subject matter, but the challenge is there, clearer, sharper and more compelling every

day. For do these people not live closer to a terrible and all-wise nature than their brethren of the sidewalks and opera houses? I think so. If I were seeking a philosophical statement for the matter it would be somewhat as follows:

The folk are the people whose manners, ethics, religious and philosophical ideals are more nearly derived from and controlled by the ways of the outside physical world (Cf. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*) than by the ways and institutions of men in a specialized society (Cf. Schnitzler's *Anatol* cycle). And the outside natural world is the fountain of wisdom, the home of the fruitful all-mother, the omnipotent God. (Also it is the dwelling-place of those two malignant devils—hazard and chance. Don't you think so?) The line of demarcation between the folk and sophisticated drama is not always easily distinguished. But as extremes they can be definitely contrasted; to instance once more, Ferenc Molnar's *The Guardsman* and S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*. And between the last two I'd always choose *The Dybbuk*—even though technique should shift for itself.

I don't claim that sophisticated drama may not be great in its own right, but somehow I never thrill to it as I do to what I like to term the folk-drama—and of course I mean the kind of folk-drama the Greeks wrote; the kind Shakespeare and Tolstoi and Haupt-



mann wrote; the kind Alexis Granowsky used to produce in Russia with its lovely burden of folk imagery, music and song. In reading *Lear*, for example, I always feel a sudden lift when we come to the heath scene. There is something grand and universal in the naked relationship of the old king to the powers of nature around him. And as characters available to my purposes, to repeat, those who live as it were with their feet in the earth and their heads bare to the storms, the lightning and the gale—those who labor with their hands wresting from cryptic nature her goods and stores of sustenance—these develop a wisdom of living which seems to me more real and beautiful than those who develop their values and ambitions from rubbing shoulders in a crowded city. And that wisdom it is which seems important—a wisdom which is consciousness of the great eternal Presence (good, bad or impersonal) by which men live and move and are allowed their existence. And if the playwrights who tell of captains and lords, kings and queens, dolls or manikins, do open up the doors of crowded buildings, cut through the filmy arras that conceals our human instincts and hopes and fears and go to the first principle of human identity—then it's true they raise the hair on our heads with their voice from the sacred grove of Colonnus. And no longer do we think of man as sophisticated or folk but man

—man alone with his destiny. And when this happens—and rare is Shakespeare, rarer than heaven—then the matter is all one, and listeners are all one. But the present clang and confusion of wheel on iron, yelling and clamor of tickers and tellers, the secrecy of vaults and locks and braggarty of monoliths of incorruptible concrete and steel—these all make it harder for us to see and hear the God who is the principle of our lives. Maybe I'm crazy on the idea of God, but aren't we all? I refer you to the wild pell-mell rush every evening out of New York when thousands and thousands are fleeing from the city to the country—to the country where the birds are, where the grass is and where there is peace.

Now you catch me almost carrying on into a scheme of social philosophy. And if I wanted to apply this half-surmised esthetic theory to the control and arrangement of peoples I should say there ought to be plenty of trees and land and outdoors for every man. For only in the outdoors can we associate with power and mystery in their most sublime manifestation. And heaven knows we ought to sense in any way we can whatever touch of sublimity there may be vouchsafed unto us in this darkness.

It seems that after all I'm saying for myself that folk-drama as such is or can be more significant than sophisticated drama. Not at all. I mean to repeat,

with a difference, that in the last analysis it is a question of neither folk nor sophisticate—but of man, man in his environment. And I would say that indoors sooner or later man must perish and outdoors there is more of a chance for him. To make another dogmatic statement, I would say that cruelty, scorn, and evils of all sorts are more native to the great cities than not, and therefore we should be better off without any great cities—I mean close, skyscraper-bedlam cities. (There's something other than politics behind Russia's efforts to create the ideal commune, don't you think?) And all the little towns that get too large for their britches and so full of metropolitan urges and apings that they cut down all the trees on their main streets and cover the grass and ground with concrete will be better off when they tear up the concrete, reset the trees and grow grass again. And maybe now that we have evolved wheels and telephones and radios and machinery of long distance coöperation we can all begin to live among trees again and yet keep in touch with each other enough for our sophisticated needs. Then haply now and then we may also have a word with the Great Presence where he walks smoking his cigar by the river bank at evening.

As to the next question of "What happens when you turn your play over to the director, designer,

actor and see them add their form to yours?"—it is more than easy to say that sometimes you are pleased with what they do and sometimes disappointed. It is never possible for the image-picture of your characters to be duplicated on the stage. Their habits, their actions and appearance are always different from the production, and necessarily so. But the production as often improves the play over the author's mind as it is likely to hurt it.

Your last question as to what the playwright should be to the theater and to the world he lives in uncovers a huge wheel-full of spokes of diverging thoughts. Briefly, though, he should be, don't you think, the same to the theatre as the gardener to his garden, or the blacksmith to his smithy, or the farmer to his field? And as for the world he lives in—his business is to express in dramatic form the serious struggles, both evil and good, that exist in that world. In other and Aristotelian phrase, he is a maker, and his business is to fashion or make his material fit the imaginative demands of his craft. And in these two words of material and craft all the trouble lies of course. But the trouble is not final, however mysterious and difficult the matter is—do you think so? For in the great outside universe around us nature is always solving these dualistic antagonisms whether it be raining or whether it be dry, and from her we

may no doubt derive both the axiom and the dream.

Now it occurs to me that I make no place for comedy (which includes melodrama and farce). Well, it apparently belongs to another point of view, just as the grotesque requires still a third kind of judgment. Comedy seems to belong entirely to man's world and to have no place in nature's world. In fact one might say that it arises from man's delight in and prankishness with himself and fellowman in so far as he forgets that he is a part of an all-powerful and demanding universe. Its basic pattern is a non-harmful incongruity which man himself provides, and that would seem to justify the definition. For nature is never funny nor playful, not even when she smiles, is she?

As for the grotesque (the hysterical), it disappears before definition and stands representative of nothing more than the frightful effort to combine the comic and the sublime (or the finite funny with the infinite serious) into the body of one piece.

You see your letter has stirred up a whole hornet's nest of trouble for me. And now that I've had to take refuge in the quagmire of metaphysics, I'd better stop. So I'll conclude by—yes, I'll say it—the play's the thing after all, whether it's indoors or outdoors.

Sincerely yours,

PAUL GREEN

*Writing for the Movies*



## IX

### *Writing for the Movies*<sup>1</sup>

PHILIP WYLIE

IT IS NOT MY INTENTION here to praise Hollywood or to bury it. Most of its characteristics, its people, its behavior patterns, its colors, and sounds have been reasonably well portrayed. And yet I cannot find that of the myriad writers who have gone to the Golden West to work in the Hollywood studios, as I have done, a single one has adequately described the business in which he was there engaged: writing for the motion pictures.

Writing for the motion pictures is worthy of description. Its technic, the conditions under which it is done, and the processes through which a story passes from the time it leaves the covers of the novel and emerges in seven reels of celluloid are steps in a human activity that is sometimes fascinating, often ridiculous, but always dramatic. Therefore, I propose to give my reader a little lesson in how to write

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, 1933, in United States and Great Britain by Harper & Brothers. Reprinted by permission of author and publisher. [Printed in *Harper's Magazine*, November, 1933.]



for the movies. I trust that when I have done with the lesson my reader will never again be able to attend the cinema with quite the same attitude. Before I went to Hollywood I used to enter a motion picture palace and sink into a gentle euphoria while the shadows floated before me. But now that I have studied the craft of the camera, my mind regarding the unrolling of a picture is as busy as a small-town telephone operator during a four-alarm fire.

There are other ways of writing a motion picture than the ways I shall describe. But they are not sufficiently different from the system at which I became a modest adept to matter gravely.

For the purpose of brevity we shall ignore my experiences when I made my first contacts with the motion picture industry and its people. We shall devote ourselves strictly to the subject in hand—although I dare say that fully half the fans never clearly realize what part a writer plays in the creation of a motion picture. The stars get all the glory. The directors get all the awe. The writers remain inscrutable and unsung.

Now whether the story of a picture is derived from a novel or from a play, from a serial or from a short story, or from the bright brain of one of the boys on the campus, it must be passed upon by a board of

big minds before it is bought. The big minds, being very busy, seldom read the original document. Moreover, the script writers dislike working from the original item. So that the first step in the preparation of a story for the pictures is the writing of what is known as a treatment. The treatment is then submitted to the story board, and if it is to be produced it is turned over to the continuity writers, who make it into the bulky manuscript held by all the director's young lady assistants during the shooting of the picture, and called a script or continuity.

Treatments are not just synopses. They do not begin, "Alfred Ogle, having fallen in love with Abigail Dillwater, followed her to the houseparty in the Pocono Hills, where he posed as an African big-game hunter."

On the contrary, into the treatment a little of the motion picture magic begins to creep. Let us run our eye over the opening paragraphs of a brace of treatments:

"As the credit titles fade we see Abigail Dillwater stepping into a large, sleek roadster in front of a New York apartment building. She is a typical Park Avenue deb, blonde and hot. Talking to her are three or four young people of her set. Her suitcases are in the back. We get a close up of her as she drives off waving, and then we see from her angle, standing

unobtrusively in the shadows of the buildings and looking hungrily after her, Alfred Ogle. Ogle is a tall, handsome, rich man's son, whose father, to punish him for his reckless living, has cut him off temporarily and forced him to become a janitor of the building in which the gal lives.

"We find this out as we follow Ogle in a series of travel shots through the ornate upper corridors of the building down to the cellar, pick him up stoking the furnaces, and develop his condition as he talks to his Swede assistant. The Swede assistant is the comic in the picture and later becomes Ogle's valet.

"In the cellar the Swede says to Ogle, 'I can tell by the way you handle that shovel that you haven't swung one all your life.'

"Whereupon Ogle briefly outlines his predicament."

Or, let us take another item. This is the beginning of the treatment for any of those airplane pictures you have been seeing. Let us imagine it is called "Death Dawn."

"With the credit titles we have some heavy music and as the music dies it is replaced by the crescendo roar of an airplane motor and we fade in on Killer Jackson in a close up at the stick of his plane. Seven thousand feet up, a grim smile on his face, we see him in a dog fight. We cut to many planes and pick

up their Maltese crosses. We see one go down in flames and we dissolve to Killer Jackson pulling up on the tarmack at his airdrome. In a medium long shot we show Jackson climb out of the fuselage and hold up three fingers. We dissolve to the interior of the officers' messroom where Jackson is still holding up three fingers.

"We get a close up of the expression on a new youngster's face as he says, 'Did you bring down three?' and a close up of Jackson as he turns sardonically to answer, 'Naw, I'm just asking for three fingers of whiskey.'"

And so it goes straight through the whole treatment. It is in the present tense. It contains only indications of the dialogue. It is written as if the author were looking at the picture himself and making a rapid word sketch of it. And it contains a good deal of the jargon of the industry. Most of that jargon is self-explanatory. A fade in is that slow materialization of a scene on the screen from absolute blackness. A fade out is the reverse. You, the audience, are probably not conscious of the fact, but when a motion picture writer causes one scene to fade out in blackness and another to fade in, he has said to you that time has elapsed—a great deal of time. A fade accomplishes the same thing that the theater

program does by saying "Act Two. Later that night." Or, "Act Two. Three weeks later."

The dissolve, in effect, is similar to the fade except that the screen never goes completely black, and the new scene commences to appear before the old one has vanished. Besides the simple dissolve, there are numerous variations, generalized as wipe dissolves, wherein a scene is peeled off from top to bottom, side to side, or even from the center outwards. The screen upon which the dissolve is being shown looks as if a windshield wiper were being passed across it, effacing the old shot and simultaneously revealing the new. The dissolve also denotes a passage in time or a change in place, but if it is used to make a time-lapse it marks one much shorter than the fade. When you write a motion picture you discover at once that you can fade to six weeks from now but you can dissolve only over such an interval as from full bouillon cups at a dinner table to empty demi-tasses, or from the first gong of a prize fight to the departure of the spectators.

The fade and the dissolve are manufactured by the gentleman who develops the negatives. The camera man merely takes sufficient footage at the ends of the scenes that are to be dissolved or faded to allow for the process. Each individual picture on the film is called a frame, and the developer of the

negative, in order to make a dissolve or a fade, takes the film out of the bath, frame by frame, so that the emulsion is increasingly eaten away until there is nothing on the negative whatever. If a fade is to be made, the negative is fastened together with a few black frames intervening; if a dissolve, the dimming ends of the over-developed frames are overlapped.

The credit titles are naturally the series of names which appear before the picture begins—the producer, the writer, the director, and the cast. Generally nobody notices them and wishes they did not take so long. Behind the credit titles are often dim scenes which indicate the general background of the picture, airplanes flying, boats in fogs, apple blossoms falling, and the like.

The close up is but one of the countless “camera angles.”

Since we are going to make a rather thorough investigation of the meaning of all continuity terminology, and although so far I have mentioned only close ups and travel shots, we might summarize the camera angles at this point.

Some terms have to do with the distance of the camera from the object of its attention. Thus, the close up includes at the most the head and perhaps the shoulders of one human being. The close shot takes in a little more. The medium shot may include

as much as the entire persons of a small group. The long shot stretches from there to the full range of the camera. You may have long shots of mountain peaks or boats far at sea. The "full shot" takes in whatever can be had of a room or a location. Thus, you have "full shot—hotel ball room"—or a "full shot—interior of medicine man's hut."

So much for the distance of the camera from its subject. Next come shots in motion: boom shots and travel shots, the camera dollies, trucks and pans, the camera zooms. "Panning" is a word derived from the early motion picture days and refers to a panorama shot in which the camera slowly turned its face from left to right, or vice versa. Now, however, the camera has a universal axis and it may "pan" up or down, to the left or to the right. Not only has the camera a four-phased neck but it is frequently mounted on wagonettes—wagonettes with rubber-tired wheels which can move noiselessly on planks laid on the ground or on the floor of sound stages. These wagonettes were originally called dollies and had a resemblance to the dollies which piano movers employ. Thus, when the camera dollies or trucks up or back, the effect on the screen is that of moving up to or away from the subject in view.

When you sit in the audience and, through the eye of the camera, move with a racing automobile,

so that you stay parallel to it, or when you follow steadily the progress of a figure plodding in the rain, you are the spectator of a travel shot. A travel shot may be made on the above-mentioned wagonettes, or it may be made from an automobile or even a motor boat.

The camera, together with a camera man, and perhaps even a director, may be mounted on the platform of a long steel arm like the boom of a crane. This steel arm is counterweighted with lead slabs which are used in precisely the quantity needed to balance the personnel and equipment on the end of the crane. Thus, if the director is fat, an extra slab may be added in the counter-balance box. The crane or boom is also mounted on wheels so that the whole gigantic gadget itself can be lifted or lowered by the action of a single man clinging to handles at the lower end.

The arrangement, in other words, is like a well-sweep on wheels which has a camera platform at the high end.

From the vantage point of the top of the boom are taken those electrifying shots in which you seem to be suspended in the air above a card table over which a dozen men are sullenly bent, when suddenly you drop right down into their midst.

There are also high-angle shots which you may



guess are taken from a high place, shooting downward.

A writer is at liberty to invent any new sort of shot his mind can contrive and insert it in the script in whatever language he may choose to make his notion clear. But the above-mentioned angles comprise the particular postures for photography.

To trick shots and special process shots I shall make subsequent reference.

## II

If you have found the preceding passage somewhat complicated, I suggest that you re-read it before we proceed, because there are still more complications to follow. You must be very courageous about the matter and bear in mind the fact that you are making a study (under the guidance of an old maestro) of one of the most intricate businesses in the world. If, on the other hand, you have grasped the rudiments of continuity terminology, you are ready to go on with me.

We will assume that the treatment for "Annabelle's Holiday" has been accepted by the Story Board and is about to be made into continuity. Another writer, whom we shall call Fred, and myself have been assigned to prepare the shooting script. Nearly all

motion picture scripts are the work of a team of two writers. So are most treatments. Nobody in Hollywood, nobody in New York, nobody in the whole world knows why they use two writers at once on a single job. In all the rest of civilization, for every great play, book, or short story written by two writers there must be several hundred that are the work of individuals. Still the movies persist in the notion that two men can work better than one. Perhaps they fear that a single writer will soldier on the job, and that by giving him a team mate the pair will act as reciprocal truant officers. Certainly they have a feeling that the more minds they concentrate on a given problem the better the solution is bound to be—and they maintain that feeling in the face of perpetual confusion, argument, and bickering, in the face of the known fact that the more people working on a quasi-artistic effort the more certain it is to be reduced to a blank, uninspired mediocrity. So . . .

When Fred and I are assigned to the picture we are total strangers. Neither of us wishes to work with the other or with anybody else; both have read the synoptic treatment of the story and have violently divergent ideas about how it should be filmed. We know from past experience that when we have finished working on the continuity, whether it is a month or two months later, we shall be either the

very best of friends or the bitterest of enemies. In fact, argument between us may very well rise to such a point that one of us or both of us will be removed from the assignment to something else. In spite of that they insist that we work together. They insist, moreover, that it will take four weeks, and possibly ten, to write the first rough draft of the script, and with two of us fighting over every scene and line, it probably will. Either of us alone could do the job in a couple of weeks without interference and his errors in judgment could subsequently be quickly ironed out by the other. Besides, if we are both fairly able continuity writers, the company may be paying us a thousand dollars a week apiece, and the first rough draft of the script for "Annabelle's Holiday" will cost, say, twenty thousand dollars instead of ten.

We are veterans, however, and we do not worry about the expense of the script. To those of my readers who are interested in why it costs so much to produce a motion picture, I might cast one sidelight here. "Annabelle's Holiday" was originally a short story about a servant girl who went alone to a circus, got lost, and was chased successively by lions, tigers, rhinoceroses, and elephants in a stampede of the animals caused by the fact that the circus was pitched near the side of an old quarry and during

the performance some dynamite went off that blew everything to pieces. Annabelle also fell in love. There was nothing more to the story, and you may say that what I have described was plenty. Far from it.

The treatment, to begin with, has been through the hands of half a dozen teams of adapters. The first team added to the original short story the idea that Annabelle was in reality a Russian princess who didn't know she was a princess because she had been carried over the snows from Moscow during the revolution while merely a babe in arms. The second and third sets of experts added nothing so far as Fred and I can learn. The fourth set of adapters inserted a touring-car load of gangsters attending the circus performance with the idea of hijacking the ticket booth, and in the end, thwarted by the explosion, they kidnap Annabelle and hold her for ransom under the impression that she is the wealthy Princess Alanasia, whom she closely resembles and whose sister she eventually proves to be. The fifth set added a comedian. They had the pleasing and brilliant idea of introducing a circus clown who gets involved with Annabelle and goes through all her adventures of stampede, kidnapping, and falling in love. "The clown is," the fifth set of adapters explain in the treatment, "not a 'Laugh, clown, Laugh' clown but a

clown who is clowning whether on the stage or not." In "Annabelle's Holiday" some of his friends, as a practical joke, have put in his make-up box a kind of face paint which will not come off, so he goes through the whole picture in the clown make-up. After that stupendous idea the fifth set of adapters helpfully add, "The humorous possibilities of a clown who cannot get off his make-up are great."

Finally, on top of that hodge-podge, we find, contributed by the last pair of gentlemen who work on the treatment, the person of the lover. In the original short story he had been a lonely country boy who had come to the circus by himself. But now he is Franz Delacroit, political exile, who had once been president of one of the Middle European nations, who is a great violinist and famous composer, and who has gone to the circus to find new motifs for his world-celebrated music.

You now get the story of a romantic, violin-playing foreign genius and ex-president falling in love with the lion-chased lady's maid, who turns out to be a princess, with laughs by courtesy of a clown who cannot get off his make-up. All that from a silly little story and, by the way, the original story was called "Marcia's Holiday." But we cannot have a girl named Marcia, because all "S" sounds are whistling, hissing, and sibilant when they are recorded. Marcia

has become Annabelle and heaven only knows what else.

My point in tracing the above genealogy of our movie was not so much to show how the plot developed as it was to show how the cost increased. As each new team of adapters was handed the work of their predecessors, the producer said to them, "Tell me what you think is wrong with this and add something to it that has a bang." Each set of gentlemen necessarily, therefore, picked a few weak spots in the story in the first instance, and in the second instance developed some brand new amazing angle. In the end the producer decided there was enough thunder and fire in the treatment to make a thrilling love story and he quit assigning adapters to it. All told, "Annabelle's Holiday" had been in the process of preparation for twenty-eight weeks. The salary of the twelve men who had worked upon it before it was turned over to Fred and me amounted to forty-nine thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars. Add our twenty thousand dollars in salary, add twenty per cent of the salary of the producer and his staff (his staff at that time being engaged in the preparation or shooting of five pictures), and you will see that before a single foot of film was shot on our happy little item about Annabelle the company had sunk itself nearly a hundred thousand dollars into the red.

## III

That, however, was not our affair. Fred and I met for the first time in the office of the producer and looked each other over warily. He was about my age. He had been writing continuity for five years. I had been writing continuity for six months. He had gone to Yale. I had gone to Princeton. We talked about Annabelle. Fred had just finished making his fourth consecutive animal picture, and he was determined to fight to the last to have the animal stampede removed from our story. I didn't care about the animals particularly but I thought we could clear the forest a little by removing the gangsters. I had a vague notion that the motion picture gangsters were getting tedious.

At lunch we came to an agreement. He would sacrifice the gangsters, which he had rather fancied, if I would sacrifice the animals. We would back up each other. After lunch we went to our producer. We began by saying, "Let's take out all the cheap element and make this a romantic Cinderella story against the background of a circus. Let's make it intelligent and more or less dreamlike. The little lady's maid who finds out she is royalty and the melancholy European idealist who finds true love in the

tawdry gilt blandishments of a circus. Heaven knows," we said to our producer, "there is enough hokum in the picture already without the stampede and without the sub-machine guns."

We argued two hours that afternoon and three hours the following morning. Then for four days we were unable to see our producer at all, so we just sat in our offices and glared at each other. Then we went to bat again, and we argued for another whole day. When we had finished, the explosion, the stampede, and the gangsters were all positively in the picture. "You've got to give 'em action," the producer said, "and plenty of it. You've got to give 'em novelty and excitement. If you boys can think up anything else besides what we already have in the treatment, I will consider putting it in the story."

Fred and I walked sadly from the producer's office and when we got outside, after we had stood still for three or four minutes in order that the noise of our footsteps might not interfere with the shooting of an exterior scene on the lawn behind the Administration Building, he said bitterly, "I'll tell you what we will do. After the stampede is over we will have a cyclone and it will pick up Franz and Annabelle and the gangsters and the animals and will carry them all to



Washington. The cyclone will rip away the top of the Capitol and will drop them all into Congress."

"That's very good," I said, "and then we will have all the members of Congress run out, and Annabelle and Franz and the animals will sit in their seats and make the laws for the nation forever afterward."

"And nobody will notice the difference," Fred said.

We looked at each other and grinned. We both said, "Anyway," simultaneously.

Then we started to laugh. We had been on the point of declaring that anyway we could go to work. We had spent a week arguing, or waiting for a chance to argue, with our producer, and we had accomplished precisely nothing.

That afternoon we sat in our offices once more. "Where shall we begin?" I asked.

"I've got it all figured out," Fred answered. "Look. We fade in on a close shot of a lion's head. We pull back the camera while he's roaring and show that he's behind bars. We truck back a little farther and pick up Annabelle standing looking at him."

I shook my head. "Can't do that," I said. "How are we going to tell who Annabelle is, if we start in the circus? We should have to have one of those stupid scenes where she says to a bystander, 'My

name is Annabelle and I am a lady's maid having a day off. I have never seen a circus before and I am an orphan and I don't know who my parents were and I am Russian.' "

Fred bristled. "We can figure out a scene about who she is all right and we have got to start with a bang."

So I bristled, too. "I don't see why we do. I think if we start slowly and work the thing up it will be more exciting than if we start with a lion's mug. I say we start with a shot of a great big town house and dolly up to the front door and dissolve through it to the front hall and the butler and pick up a lot of ladies at tea and then pick up Annabelle working upstairs and telling some other servant that tomorrow is her afternoon off, or some such thing."

"That's rotten," Fred said. "But wait a minute. I've got it. We open on the dolly shot and dissolve on the big house all right, but it is morning and the servants are having breakfast and it is Annabelle's day off, so she's sleeping a little late and they're talking about her, and we get in all the stuff about how la-de-da she is for an orphan and then she comes in, sweet and sleepy."

I nodded my head. "Let's go," I said.

We called in a secretary. This is what we wrote and how we wrote it.

## ANNABELLE'S HOLIDAY

## SEQUENCE "A"

Behind the credit titles we see a huge metropolitan mansion set back from the street. Traffic moves in front of it.

SOUND: (*Thematic music—traffic noises*)

As the last credit title fades out the house fades into sharp focus, and we zoom up to the front door. We hold on the front door for a moment and then we

DISSOLVE TO:

A-1

MEDIUM SHOT—INTERIOR FRONT HALL

A butler with his nose in the air, slowly walks across the hall.

SOUND: (*Dignified footsteps*)

DISSOLVE TO:

A-2

MEDIUM SHOT—LARGE DINING ROOM TABLE SET FOR BREAKFAST

A man in a morning coat is sitting at the end of the huge table finishing his breakfast. He is reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar while he sips his coffee. THE CAMERA

PANS from the man to the doors to the pantry and starts to TRUCK toward those doors.  
DISSOLVE TO:

A-3

FULL SHOT—INTERIOR OF  
KITCHEN

There servants are having breakfast together in a large kitchen of the mansion. There is a chauffeur in uniform. There are a couple of maids in uniform. There is a chef. There is a gardener.

THE CAMERA TRUCKS FORWARD to the table where we see the chauffeur look at his watch.

He drinks his coffee.

CHAUFFEUR: *Pretty nearly time to be going.*

*Where's Annabelle?*

MAID: *(Sarcastically)*  
*This is her day off, so she's playing grande dame. (She mispronounces the words)*

CHAUFFEUR: *What do you mean—"grondom"?*

CHEF: *(Interrupting)*  
*Grande dame. Eet ees a Frranch expression. Eet means "great ladeeee."*

CHAUFFEUR: *(Snorting)*  
*Great lady! Darned if she's not! If you want to have your face slapped,*

*Emil, just make a pass at that little Russian orphan. I ought to know.*

Emil chuckles.

A-4

MEDIUM SHOT ANOTHER ANGLE

—AT GROUP

As one of the maids leans forward, grinning.

MAID: *I never slap anybody's face.*

Everybody laughs. The maid glances quickly out of scene.

SOUND: *(Footsteps descending stairs)*

MAID: *Pipe down. Here she comes.*

A-5

LONG SHOT—SHOOTING ACROSS KITCHEN TO BACK STAIRWAY

A hand appears on the rail of the staircase and slips down. Annabelle is revealed. She smiles.

ANNABELLE: *Good morning, everybody.*

ALL: *(They ad lib good-morning greetings)*

Annabelle is blonde and very beautiful. She is dressed in cheap but tasteful street clothes and she is wearing a little hat. She looks very patrician and not at all like a servant. Her face is bright and gay, evidently with relish

for the day's liberty. As she continues down the staircase there is a whistle out of scene.

SOUND: (*Man's whistle*)

A-6

CLOSE SHOT AT CHAUFFEUR

He looks at Annabelle with a leer.

CHAUFFEUR: *Boy, oh boy! When are you and me going to have a day off together? Let's make it an evening off instead.*

A-7

MEDIUM SHOT—THE GROUP

As Annabelle sits a little unhappily at the table and looks at the chauffeur.

ANNABELLE: *Never, I hope.*

SOUND: (*A buzzer rings*)

The servants instantly change their routines. The maid who is waiting on the man in the dining room hurries out of the kitchen. The chef rushes over to the stove. The chauffeur puts on his cap and looks at his watch again. Annabelle sits calmly at the table in the midst of the sudden activity and begins to eat her breakfast.

DISSOLVE TO:

A—8

TRAVEL SHOT—ANNABELLE ON STREET

Annabelle is window shopping on a smart department store boulevard and we follow her from window to window, TRUCKING with her as she alternately pauses to look at displays and walks on. These TRAVEL SHOTS are interspersed with INSERTS of what Annabelle sees:

INSERT—of three or four clothes dummies wearing ladies' beach clothes.

INSERT—of jewelry store window full of bracelets and necklaces.

INSERT—of perfume display—a pyramid of fancy bottles.

INSERT—of children's toy store with windowful of expensive toys.

After the insertions we follow Annabelle for a few more feet in our TRAVEL SHOT and show that she is smiling as if she enjoyed all the things she had seen in spite of the fact that she can have none of them.

DISSOLVE TO:

A—9

At "A-9" we knocked off for the day. We had done three pages of our continuity. We had about ninety more to do. During the writing of the above we had gone out for lunch. We had had arguments over the following matters: One, do gentlemen who wear morning coats and live in big houses read newspapers at the breakfast table? Two, do the servants in such a house eat in the kitchen? Three, does the chef wear one of those white caps that look like sixty per cent of a dumb-bell? Four, was the maid's conversation about Annabelle's day off and about the little Russian orphan and about "here she comes" too planted? Five, was the chauffeur's interest in Annabelle a good build up for her or should it be eliminated because of the fact that he would play no part in the rest of the picture? Six, since Scene A-9, to be written on the following day would show Annabelle looking at a huge billboard advertising the circus and deciding wistfully to go to the circus by herself, wouldn't it be better if we cut out all the inserts and picked up Annabelle doing that as soon as she left the house for her day off?

Besides those discussions, we had several arguments about how various characters would speak, and we ran all over the writers' building getting people to pronounce "*grande dame*" until we found somebody who said it badly enough to give us an idea of a



phony spelling. While we were running all over the writers' building we made several quite lengthy calls and sat with friends talking about the state of the picture industry. Since, on the average, we work about five hours a day, it must be remembered that our collective time was costing the company more than thirty dollars an hour, and some of the men with whom we whiled away the bright moments were being paid as much as two thousand dollars a week, so that the net cost of our visits must have run well above a hundred dollars.

Anyway, late in the afternoon we went home, each of us feeling that the other was a stubborn and untractable fellow. But in the morning, bright and fresh, we were back at work, and so for almost two months we proceeded to detail the exploits of Annabelle.

#### IV

You will observe that when I say "detail" I use the word advisedly. If you look at the above fragment of continuity analytically you will see that it contains the following elements: each shot (or camera set up) is separate; the kind of shot or camera angle is indicated; the location is indicated ("interior kitchen," "exterior façade of house," etc.); a description of each character as he or she appears is given; for each

shot the stage is completely set, the properties are listed, the person who speaks and that person's dialogue are set down; where it is necessary the mood or tone in which words are spoken is noted; every sound aside from human voices which occurs in the motion picture is stated; the end of each scene is described as a dissolve or a fade—but if there is no such description it is understood that the scene is cut—*i.e.*, it is to have the effect on the screen of an instantaneous jump from place to place or person to person.

Not only is each camera set up separated from the one that precedes and the one that follows, but the continuity is divided into two columns. In the left-hand column are all the camera directions, all the stage directions and all the descriptions of people and of action. In the right-hand column is all that is to be caught on the sound track.

Of course, when the picture is shooting, the director may make changes in our camera angles or our set ups. In the great majority of motion pictures, however, he follows the script. So does the camera man. So do the actors. So do the technical department and the department which designs the sets. Thus, it may be seen that it is usually the writer who makes the motion picture, and the director and stars merely follow him sedulously.

In writing "Annabelle's Holiday" we made use of the motion pictures' bag of tricks. Fred and I called for a full shot of the big top and animal tent when the explosion which freed the animals occurred. That shot was supplied by the miniature department, which blew up a circus tent about five feet in diameter, around which was a litter of toy wagons and the like as well as an array of dolls.

The scenes in which Annabelle was chased by a rhinoceros were taken in split screen and in transparency.

Split screen shots are self-explanatory. You rope off a corner of what is made to look like circus grounds and laboriously chase a rhinoceros through it, while your camera takes a full shot. Afterward you have Annabelle run through while your camera takes another full shot. Then you cut the two films in half, lengthwise, throw away the halves on which there is no action, place the halves containing Annabelle and the rhinoceros together and print them. And, behold! You have a moving picture of Annabelle running madly with the furious behemoth behind her.

A transparency is more intricate. You take a picture of a rhinoceros running along the ground and you project the picture on a huge glass screen. Then you lead Annabelle to the opposite side of the screen,

set up a new battery of cameras, urge Annabelle to run valiantly on a treadmill which carries fragments of moving foreground, start your motion picture behind her, and photograph not only Annabelle running but also the projected moving picture of the giant beast behind her, and thereby you obtain the effect of a young lady in a dreadful predicament.

v

By now I trust that my reader feels himself fairly well informed upon the art and science of writing motion-picture continuity. I have been at some pains to put at your disposal the terminology and its definitions. I have carefully selected samples of treatments and of a continuity for your examination. But, lest my reader think that nothing remains for him but to board a Hollywood-bound train—lest he finds himself possessed with the notion that making a motion picture is a cinch—I must add one or two notes of warning.

Do not believe, for example, that after sixty days had passed and Fred and I had finished writing our script or continuity we went to higher things. On the contrary. The ninety pages of legal size typewriter paper detailing Annabelle's dramatic life and the duties of directors, stars, and camera men were

only the beginning. The script was called "the first pink." "First pinks" always go to the Story Board. When the Story Board looked at it they decided to take out the gangsters and the kidnapping episode and put in the story of a Russian girl who had been masquerading as the Princess Alanasia and who was unmasked by the discovery that the little lady's maid was the true Princess. Fred and I spent another sixty days rewriting the opus. A second pink script was submitted. The second effort was not modified in any major way, but after the Story Board had finished its contemplation they presented us with a list of eighty-five minor changes. We made the eighty-five changes in ten days. Then our effort was mimeographed on white paper and submitted again as "the first white."

A director was chosen and the picture was cast. The director had never heard of Annabelle or her perils and he flatly refused to accept the gag of the clown upon whose face the paint was permanently stuck. He developed a magnificent notion that the clown should really be a pickpocket who was only disguised as a clown. So we rewrote the clown part and inserted it on blue pages in the white script, tearing out the original pages referring to the clown.

The whole thing was then mimeographed once again and at last, almost six months after we had

started to think about Annabelle, we were able to dismiss her from our minds.

At that time the mention of her name was capable of turning either of us a peculiar color and stirring up in our bodies a strange repressed trembling.

The script we at last submitted was far, far from what we had hoped the picture might be. You may remember that we had thought of it as a dream-like romantic comedy. But when we went to the première of our opus there had been other changes. A new writer had been assigned to it and had given Annabelle a Russian accent throughout. The animal men in our company had failed to get a charging rhinoceros, and a tiger had been substituted. The tiger, however, would not work well, and in the middle of the chase Annabelle threw her head over her shoulder to find, not a striped jungle cat behind her, but a polar bear. The actor chosen to play the pick-pocket clown had refused to be a pick-pocket for fear it would hurt his reputation and the director had yielded, so that once again he appeared as a clown with indelible make-up. We had had five gangsters in our continuity but in the cinema as the world observed it there were nine. We had had one burst of machine-gun fire but the director had added seventeen, making a total of eighteen rattling blasts. And the explosion which set free the "beasties" was caused,

not by a carelessly dropped match, as we had had it, but by the stamping of an elephant on a stick of dynamite.

Anyway, the picture was made. When you realize that in a sense each motion picture depends for its final appearance almost equally upon the Story Board, the producer, the continuity writers, the director, the stars, the camera men, the light men, the sound men, the technical department, the special effects department, the scenery designer, and all the machinery, gadgets, tools, and apparatus pertaining thereto, as well as upon the carpenters and their unions, grips and their unions, the plasterers, the metal workers, the machinists, the extras, the secretarial force in the front office, and the secretarial force that worked for the writers, you will begin to see how easy it is to blow in sweet music and have horrible noises come out.

I once calculated that more than seven thousand things could and commonly do happen to each and every motion picture to damage it, alter it, or spoil it.

But in the face of that somewhat startling division of responsibilities you, my dear reader, will perceive, I trust, that the poor writer, so often neglected and so rarely connected with the industry, is really the *deus ex machina*. And perhaps if you are ever offered the proverbial fifty thousand dollars you will

hesitate a long time before you purchase the long green ticket and the pink Pullman reservation, because, although writing for motion pictures is a science and an art, it is also an undertaking which makes Marathon dancing look sensible and easy.





*The Poetic Process from the Inside*



## X

### *The Poetic Process from the Inside*<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD

THERE IS A TRADITIONAL opinion that the poetic process is something everlastingly miraculous, a notion fostered by the poets themselves. The ancients bade the muse to do the versifying; and Emerson, the modern, said, "I like my verses best because it is not I that made them." And several of a number of contemporary German poets, replying to a questionnaire sent out by an ingenious psychologist at Munich, became characteristically indignant at the imputation that they knew what they were doing. Nor have other poets, in their few scattered accounts of their processes, given the critical student much help. The young Coleridge in his *Dejection: an Ode*—a poem which, for perfectly gorgeous description of cloud and storm and the aching living heart of man and the energies of the imagination on the alert, has no parallel even in Coleridge himself—laments the complete loss of all creative energy: his

---

<sup>1</sup> From the *Bookman*, August, 1932. Used by permission of the author and The Bookman Publishing Co., Inc.

"shaping power of imagination." He is of course paradoxically borrowing memories of a prior listless state in a very lively moment that denies that state by the very creative power to describe both the state and the splendid world to which it fails to awake. It will be remembered that here Coleridge makes joy the essential principle of the creative imagination; this too he denies in the mood of the poem. Why the poetic energy may lapse, as it ultimately did in the older Coleridge, or manifest itself only in rare and intense intervals as in Housman, is beyond the scope of this paper; but this I will say, that when it is present it is essentially *energy*, not joy, as both this *Ode* and *A Shropshire Lad* may remind us.

Energy: being preternaturally alive in the five senses, in ideas, in emotions whether of joy, hope, sorrow, indignation, resolve. Hopeless grief or any other situation that takes *all* the life out of one is, as Mrs. Browning said, passionless, *i.e.*, without energy, —and, she added, speechless, quite speechless. Joy may be one phase of energy in creating a poem, as in some of Goethe's lyrics and in the Gilbert and Sullivan operas; but it is oftener a result of the creation: the poets Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, Meredith in *Modern Love*, were not aroused by joy; but, in the successful employment of great energy, intellectually controlled, they must have experienced that feeling

of purposeful and triumphant vitality, in harmony with their personalities and with their ideals of human life, which alone give the word joy its one highest human meaning. So, on the other hand, I suppose the most exact psychological negative to such joy is to be *blocked*, for whatever reasons without or within, when one has the *energy* to create and can't bring the creation to pass. The state is not despair or listlessness or surrender; but desperate misery, thrashing about, restive poignancy of pain. Such a gestation period has preceded many a great poem: Wordsworth (as in *The Prelude*) and others have referred to it. Coleridge has another account of the poetic process: he dreamed a poem, which he started to write down on awaking, when "he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock." The account is doubtless correct as far as it goes—but how little that was has been shown by Mr. Lowes in his brilliant study, already a classic, *The Road to Xanadu*. The question was still: why the dream? The episode, however, is valuable in literary history as the clearest example on record of the poetic process as essentially subconscious, just as Goethe's analytic comments are the clearest critical testimony.

But the most explicit account by a poet of the poetic process is of course that of Poe on *The Raven*:

how he figured it all out, quite rationally, quite consciously, beforehand—just what was the most sorrowful and what the most uncanny combination of situation and just how to render them mortally convincing. Critics have long since explained Poe's essay as either downright spoofing, intentional fooling of others, instigated both by his desire to shock received opinion and by that peculiarly cool intellectual talent in his make-up, revealed in his analytic tales and in his interest in ciphers, in such contrast to his poetic gift; or as a quite sincere fooling of himself by the process now known as rationalization—in old days called after-thoughts. I don't think either explanation is psychologically exact, though either may well contain an element of truth. The central truth was, however, presumably as follows: Poe had been brooding over some ideas—obviously characteristic of his dominating ideas and moods through life, as reiterated in his prose and his other verse. These ideas began to organize themselves *intellectually* in his subconsciousness, like a mathematician's subconscious beginnings of a solution of a problem in calculus; and at the same time began to organize themselves *artistically* as fragments of image, narrative, and cadence. I stress the temporal moment—"began to"—as also the causal moment: the moment when he began to write, that is, to work out the intellectual organi-

zation in terms of the artistic; and causal in two senses—as psychological urge from behind and as creative project ahead. Either during the writing, or after the completion of the poem—he himself could not, in all likelihood, have told just when—he became aware, as critic and analyst, of what he was striving for and how the effects were produced. But his analysis was not mere afterthoughts, without significance in the actual composition: his analysis, quite unbeknown to himself, was due to a welling up into consciousness of precisely what had been going on during the period of brooding. His subconscious creative energies thus appeared finally in consciousness, and articulate before the world, in two forms: (1) in the form of the organized work of art itself, the drama, the music; (2) in the form of organized explications of the brooding process—that is, explanatory ideas not read into his poetic processes afterwards, but directly stimulated by the still active reverberations of subconscious thinking. In spite of its superficial psychology, Poe is nearer the truth than the popular opinion that such a highly organized poem was the product of a drunken debauch.

Of recent years, the psychologists, especially the psycho-analysts, have contributed to the problem of the poetic process. Their formula is that the poetic process is, specifically, an escape from reality. I have



no reason today to repudiate a marginal note of mine (quoted in Taylor and Culler's monograph on *The Locomotive God*, in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Oct.-Dec., 1929), made long ago to an article by Professor Jacobs on *The Psychology of Poetic Talent*). Professor Jacobs had stated that "because the artist is usually by temperament unfitted to enjoy even a tolerable degree of satisfaction in the world as it exists, he is forced to create through his imagination an environment suited to him, an environment in which he can find, if not contentment, at least a normal mode of release for his energies." My note said: "This holds only of a certain type—the type that is dissatisfied to the point of rejection: another type abounds in and through reality, takes reality to himself, clasps, loves, interprets the life of reality. . . . Professor Jacobs has failed to note the basic, general, human insights of the poet . . . and he has failed to note his function as giving *new life* to common experience and to old ideas." To which I would now add that this is the type that has given us the great poems in all languages. The former is normal only for immaturity. What remoulding of the world nearer to the heart's desire one may think he finds in the great poems turns out to be mainly the elimination of irrelevant details, and the correlations of cause and effect with more vivid definition—that is,

an imaginative *clarification* of reality, not an imaginative *escape* from reality.

I have been speaking about others' reports of the poetic process, with critical clues furnished me by introspection. In reporting on my own mind and history, my first testimony would be on what I do not understand. I look back and realize that I started to make verses, impelled by several quite obvious motives: (1) by pleasure in manipulating words and phrases, merely a more complex form of a child's fun in talking; (2) by vanity, desire to be thought a bright boy by my schoolmates and to be distinguished as a bard in manhood; and (3) by self-identification with a favorite author, as so thrilled by his words that I tried to be him. But all this implies a prior set toward poetic activity. And what does that mean? My mother wrote a good deal of verse, on the back porch or in the back parlour of the homestead, during my childhood: had this created the set? I am not so sure as the psycho-analysts or the behaviourists would be. I used to see her with pencil and pad; and I used to read her verses in print (some of them about me); and I had small conscious interest, rather indifference, or the same juvenile contempt I had for her botanizing.

To this the canny psychologist might reply: "Your own versifying was subconscious rivalry, your very

contempt revealing your jealousy." Upon which will occur to anyone but a doctrinaire the question: "Why didn't the rivalry, with its equal contempt, make him a botanist?" I think that initial set remains; and that whatever relation it has to my mother is hereditary, not environmental—that I got from her something which, combined with other inherited qualities, would have enabled me to carry out further than she the activities of the poet, even if she had died at my birth . . . and not only this last autumn. One might find this inborn set in my early childhood so devoted to making things—building blocks into houses, chiseling out toy boats and rigging their decks. But there was nothing here different from the manipulatory activities of any restive planning child. I interested my elders then as an incipient engineer; they thought I would become a builder of bridges. Why did such creative energies as I had turn me by my middle teens to poem-builder? I can't get behind the simple statement as old as Horace: I was born that way. Except to add that it was certainly puberty that awakened the latent poet in me, as it awakened the latent sex.

To adolescent idealism, thrills in the presence of nature and in the contemplation of human history, awe before the mystery of the world, expanding feelings of my own personal powers—to these common factors there seems to have been supplied, as all-im-

portant differentiating factors, a greater sensitiveness to verbal expression—felt first most poignantly in our Virgil class, as recounted long after in a poem called *The Dawn*—and an absorbing urge to put ideas about life together rather than blocks and girders; though long before puberty the set toward life and talk had unawares been gaining over these blocks and these girders. And creative energy directed toward talk about life means directly or indirectly talk about one's own life, what values one gets out of experience or puts into experience.

I still think of poetry as impassioned and effective talk, though to define adequately the words "impassioned" and "effective" would make a long chapter. When my friend comes back from a walk in the warm May twilight, along the lake under the trees glittering with raindrops in the sunset, and, meeting me, begins to pour out his own exaltation in the experience, is he not creating a poem? His talk reveals the two moments that make a poem: the moment of communication to others, the double moment of reminiscence and self-clarification—of fixating the experience for himself. The moment of communication reminds us that really vital talk is propaganda, that poetry is propaganda, that, indeed, all art is propaganda—though not all propaganda is art. Com-

municating a vision of any sort means an exigent craving to have that vision prevail among men.

Why does one artist turn to paint, another to words? And why does one of those who turn to words write a novel, and another a poem? There may be casual and external factors in early childhood and in adolescence, but I think it is, again, the inexplicable set: the differentiated make-up to be found even in a litter of puppies, as any dog-fancier can tell you. Psychologists sometimes need reminding that even a conditioned reflex is conditioned by the organism itself quite as much as by the stimulus. The poet, more than the novelist, seizes upon the moment in any experience that contains the most, the pregnant point of it all. The poet's satisfactions in putting experience into words, into talk, are achieved far more intensely by ordered sound values, rhythm and sonority, by symbolic substitution, and by verbal condensation—a suggestible potency in one musical word after another or one musical line after another to fixate for himself and to touch off for others a whole world of thoughts and things. The poet, as distinct from the novelist, loves magical phrases—he glories in incantations. And this concentration of creative energy manifests itself not only in the power of the incantations, but in the emotional tension, at

once more brief and more acute than the novelist's whereby the incantations are produced.

But what goes on when the poet chooses one theme rather than another, or one metre or stanza rather than another? It is easier to tell what doesn't go on. He doesn't choose his theme: his theme comes. To be sure, literary history is full of accounts of poets choosing their themes, and indeed after discarding many tentative choices. Themes chosen in the way one chooses, for instance, to address an audience on one topic rather than another, actuated by considerations of timeliness, or character of the audience, or vanity, never result in a great poem—look again into Moore's *Lalla Rookh*. Themes chosen after brooding, in recurrent states of restlessness, are simply the emerging into consciousness of the gestations of subconscious powers, memories, and impulses that make him what he is or has become, and that differentiate this poet, in character, in experiences, and in evaluations, from some other poet. The themes he discarded were simply false alarms, partially alien, but containing, doubtless, elements ultimately identical with the ultimate theme: compare Milton's earlier recorded list with *Paradise Lost*. But my own experience leads me to believe that usually the theme simply comes, with imperious clarity, so to say choosing its poet, even as *Faust* chose the young Goethe. Byron

says he chose Don Juan; but that was merely a manner of speaking: the theme was the completion of the long implicit Byron.

The antecedent state may appear in consciousness vaguely as a mood, as a picture, of fragments of a picture, as a direct memory, or as a feeling of something half-remembered or of something strangely desirable, as half-realized verbal melodies, as a premonition of creative power, or as something in itself far more intellectual—an ethical maxim, a conceptual suggestion soliciting an ethical or dramatic situation. I literally found myself writing the *Lynching Bee* before I knew it. The antecedent states had evidently not been incipient creative processes at all, but year-long meditations on the horrors of the World War, on the phenomena of lynching, on the Negro race, combining with subconscious memories of childhood terrors not consciously associated with the poem till I had clinically explored, several years later, my infantile experience. But suddenly something organized itself inside me and called for instant expression.

I keep returning to the unknown. What happened: what is organization? I know only that organization, subconscious linking of ideas, of emotional tensions, of imagery, of memories, into one whole—essentially an intellectual, rational, meaningful whole—is the outstanding difference as result between the splurge

and sputter of adolescent versifying and a mature poet's work; and that this difference comes not by calculation but in the immediacy of composition itself—though of course the organization works itself out consciously in the midst of many false moves.

A vital part of this organization is the so-called form. The poet doesn't choose his metre, either. The theme is as much the form as it is the substance. Probably the moment when the subconscious organization has taken shape really means *taken verbal shape*; that is, become associated, in the specific psychological sense, with a given mode and pattern of expression; and this the moment when one is overwhelmed with the urge to write; that is, to work it all out. To be sure, literary anecdote records both theme and form as something deliberately chosen: as when Keats and Hunt *decided* to write in rivalry each a sonnet on a grasshopper. Poets can, of course, play with their gifts as well as other people. And here they were playing with form, rather than grasshoppers, both of them at the time (as we know biographically) having the sonnet form dominating their subconscious and itself urging the content. And here is possibly a clue to the initial urge in other and far greater poems in the world: that is, the initial stir may be insistent verbal and musical structure seek-



ing theme as well as theme seeking verbal and musical structure.

A note further on form. I recall the bewilderment of a psychologist that his poet-friend had talked along in an extended narrative poem more or less as easily as he himself talked to his class, unhampered by the form. A poet's initial set for manipulating speech, with the long years of practice in given forms—here again the sonnet-form—doubtless results in a control of a more difficult structure, and satisfactions in a more difficult structure, than extempore prose-speech, more complicated, as in patterns of regularized rhythms and recurrent sounds, and as in more massive units involved with the conventional norms of prose syntax. But the difference is less than our psychologist was aware of: in ordinary speech we have developed, all of us, an astounding dexterity in phrasal organization, even to musical cadences, and rattle along true to form and usually quite unconscious of form. What we can call the poet's grammar is nearer to good extemporary prose, in point of complexity, than such prose is to the rudimentarily articulated grammar of a child.

Does form, something in outline fairly fixed, ever modify the poet's imagery or the points he would make? Does rhyme, for instance, hamper the thought, as Milton said, or itself sometimes, as Mr. Lowes sug-

gests, stimulate to an apposite image or point? It may do either. The psychic mechanism of even a great poet has its fits and starts. What happy strokes may be credited to the need of a rhyme must remain guesswork, unless the poet choose to tell—and even he may not know. But we can observe the frustrations. We have all read forced rhymes in *Endymion*, have seen fragments of Shelley with the last part of the line blank awaiting a cadence to be rounded out by a rhyme. My own testimony would be that, when the poet is driving ahead, he is as little conscious of form, either as an embarrassment or as directive urge, of the metre, the alliterations, the rhyme, the cadences, as such, as is an excited orator in a vigorous flowing platform appeal. He is aware of the effects, and whether they satisfy him or not; but not aware of what produces them, except in retrospective analysis. Certainly what scientific equipment I have as metrist, phonetician, or philologist has never played any conscious part in my verse-makings, though I assume it has played a subconscious part. And even by later analysis I have seldom been able to say whether an idea and an image suggested the rhyme, or the rhyme the idea and image; and, when I have been able, it has been noticeably in cases when neither was satisfying. And in moments when I have halted, I have halted far less as constricted by specific poetic

form than as blurred in vision and as blocked in expression. It does remain true that a good poem isn't put together, but grows together,—and by subconscious processes as yet unexplained, except in a few *aperçus*. In general, whereas creative pressure is released in that moment when the issues have begun to take specific musical form, the form in turn continually stirs the poet to the evolution and exploitation of the issues that summoned it in the beginning—a reminder, again, that they are organically one.

Mr. Lowes has traced in Coleridge's reading many items that seem to have fused subconsciously into the images and purposes of his famous poems; in the nature of things, he could not trace out items in the man's daily experience which must have contributed something, we can never know just what—perhaps less, though, in the bookish Coleridge, bookish with such imaginative alertness, than in most poets. I have done incidentally for my own poems something of what Mr. Lowes did for Coleridge's. During the year-long probings described in *The Locomotive God*, I was startled again and again by revived memories, often from early childhood, that thereupon immediately became linked in consciousness with an image or an idea in one or another of my poems, producing an overwhelming feeling of causal connection: "Oh that was what I meant in that line"

—"So that was the origin of that image." Now and then, but far more rarely, would I light on something reminiscent of my reading, though it has been both varied and intensive. The proof of the connection I found in this overwhelming feeling of recognition and discovery—I should say recovery. For instance, in a poem on the Quaker Meeting House, as symbolically contrasted with the army barracks, is a line about how it stands so quiet and eloquently plain,

With shingle-siding in the setting sun.

And a little below, the lines

You cannot guess how beautiful it seems:  
Above the Capitol and marble dome,  
Above the spired Cathedral and its dreams,  
Unto the way-worn sons of men it gleams  
Far down the Land-Marks to the ocean streams,  
With windows burning like the Fires of Home.

One night, in hypnoidal consciousness, these lines, composed several years before, popped into my head just after I'd recalled a certain Quaker meeting-house of my earliest childhood, along with the associated recall of the passage in *Beowulf* describing the Hall Heorot shining over the lands. The subconsciousness is indifferent to span of space or lapse of time. So too I have recognized that lines about the sky or the woods had got what freshness they had, not from the

particular sky or woods consciously in mind, but from the subconscious reverberations of the fresh new life of forgotten childhood.

Thus I am reminded of the strange and exalted union of man and of child that in the most literal psychological sense must characterize the poet, in proportion as he is truly the poet. He must be most richly the mature man in range, organization, and interpretation of experience, and most abundantly the mature master of communication; but he must remain withal the child—the child, as preserving in the midst of the social patterns of reaction-behaviour, including speech-behaviour, the child's free and naive immediacy in responses to experience and in phrasing that experience, and the child's thrill and wonder in the presence of a world forever fresh—whose infinite variety age indeed cannot wither nor custom stale. You remember how Wordsworth, who lamented so often the lost glow—in such glowing imagery—was himself the one who said his man's heart leapt up when he beheld a rainbow in the sky. And apparently, too, the poet is, of all men, the character-type in whom most insistently reverberates in the mature subconscious, both activating it and activated by it, in facile interplay, the specific buried memories and moods of the child, of the little child. This psychological preservation in the poet's subcon-

sciousness of specific experiences of his childhood is to be clearly distinguished from his preservation of the child's mode of reaction to his experience in maturity; but the phenomena are surely related. Together they complete a truth long felt before modern analysis:

The poet hath the child's sight in his breast  
And sees all new: what oftenest he has viewed  
He views with the first glory.

I find myself quoting again from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mrs. Browning was not always the good poet; but she was gifted to see and to say many good things about the good poet.



*Letter to a Young Poet*





## XI

### *Letter to a Young Poet*<sup>1</sup>

VIRGINIA WOOLF

MY DEAR JOHN:

DID YOU EVER MEET, OR WAS he before your day, that old gentleman—I forget his name—who used to enliven conversation, especially at breakfast, when the post came in by saying that the art of letter writing is dead? The penny post, the old gentleman used to say, has killed the art of letter writing. Nobody, he continued, examining an envelope through his eyeglasses, has the time even to cross their “t’s.” We rush, he went on, spreading his toast with marmalade, to the telephone. We commit out half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card. Gray is dead, he continued; Horace Walpole is dead; Madame de Sévigné—she is dead too, I suppose he was about to add, but a fit of choking cut him short, and he had to leave the room before he

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally issued in the Hogarth Letters Series, published by the Hogarth Press, London. Reprinted by permission of the author and the Hogarth Press.

had time to condemn all the arts, as his pleasure was, to the cemetery. But when the post came in this morning and I opened your letter stuffed with little blue sheets written all over in a cramped but not illegible hand—I regret to say, however that several “t’s” were uncrossed and the grammar of one sentence seems to me dubious—I replied after all these years to that elderly nekrophilist—Nonsense. The art of letter writing has only just come into existence. It is the child of the penny post.

And there is some truth in that remark, I think. Naturally, when a letter cost half a crown to send, it had to prove itself a document of some importance; it was read aloud; it was tied up with green silk; after a certain number of years it was published for the infinite delectation of posterity. But your letter, on the contrary, will have to be burnt. It cost only three halfpence to send. Therefore you could afford to be intimate, irreticent, indiscreet in the extreme. What you tell me about poor dear C. and his adventure on the channel boat is deadly private; your ribald jests at the expense of M. would certainly ruin your friendship if they got about; I doubt, too, that posterity, unless it is much quicker in the wit than I expect, could follow the line of your thought from the roof which leaks (“splash, splash, splash into the soap dish”) past Mrs. Gape, the charwoman, whose retort

to the greengrocer gives me the keenest pleasure, via Miss Curtis and her odd confidence on the steps of the omnibus, to Siamese cats ("Wrap their noses in an old stocking, my Aunt says, if they howl"); so to the value of criticism to a writer; so to Donne; so to Gerard Hopkins; so to tombstones; so to goldfish; and so, with a sudden alarming swoop, to—"Do write and tell me where poetry's going, or if it's dead?" No, your letter, because it is a true letter—one that can neither be read aloud now, nor printed in time to come—will have to be burnt. Posterity must live upon Walpole and Madame de Sévigné. The great age of letter writing, which is, of course, the present, will leave no letters behind it. And in making my reply there is only one question that I can answer or attempt to answer in public: about poetry and its death.

But before I begin, I must own up to those defects, both natural and acquired, which, as you will find, distort and invalidate all that I have to say about poetry. The lack of a sound university training has always made it impossible for me to distinguish between an iambic and a dactyl, and as if this were not enough to condemn one forever, the practice of prose has bred in me, as in most prose writers, a foolish jealousy, a righteous indignation—anyhow an emotion which the critic should be without. For

how, we despised prose writers ask when we get together, could one say what one meant and observe the rules of poetry? Conceive dragging in "blade" because one had mentioned "maid"; and pairing "sorrow" with "borrow"? Rhyme is not only childish but dishonest, we prose writers say. Then we go on to say: And look at their rules! How easy to be a poet! How strait the path is for them, and how strict! This you must do; this you must not. I would rather be a child and walk in a crocodile down a suburban path than write poetry, I have heard prose writers say. It must be like taking the veil and entering a religious order—observing the rites and rigors of metre. That explains why they repeat the same thing over and over again. Whereas we prose writers (I am only telling you the sort of nonsense prose writers talk when they are alone) are masters of language, not its slaves; nobody can teach us; nobody can coerce us; we say what we mean; we have the whole of life for our province. We are the creators, we are the explorers.—So we run on, nonsensically enough, I must admit.

But now that I have made a clean breast of these deficiencies, let us proceed. From certain phrases in your letter I gather that you think that poetry is in a parlous way and that your case as a poet in this particular autumn of 1931 is a great deal harder than

Shakespeare's, Dryden's, Pope's, or Tennyson's. In fact, it is the hardest case that has ever been known. Here you give me an opening, which I am prompt to seize, for a little lecture. Never think yourself singular, never think your own case much harder than other people's. I admit that the age we live in makes this difficult. For the first time in history there are readers—a large body of people, occupied in business, in sport, in nursing their grandfathers, in tying up parcels behind counters—they all read now; and they want to be told how to read and what; and their teachers—the reviewers, the lecturers, the broadcasters—must in all humanity make reading easy for them; assure them that literature is violent and exciting, full of heroes and villains, of hostile forces perpetually in conflict, of fields strewn with bones, of solitary victors riding off on white horses, wrapped in black cloaks, to meet their death at the turn of the road. A pistol shot rings out. "The age of romance was over. The age of realism had begun"—you know the sort of thing. Now, of course, writers themselves know very well that there is not a word of truth in all this—there are no battles, and no murders, and no defeats, and no victories. But as it is of the utmost importance that readers should be amused, writers acquiesce. They dress themselves up. They act their parts. One leads; the other follows. One

is romantic, the other realist. One is modern, the other out of date. There is no harm in it, so long as you take it as a joke, but once you believe in it, once you begin to take yourself seriously as a leader, or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative, then you become a self-conscious, biting, and scratching little animal whose work is not of the slightest importance or value to anybody. Think of yourself rather as something much humbler and less spectacular but to my mind far more interesting—a poet in whom live all the poets of the past, from whom all poets in time to come will spring. You have a touch of Chaucer in you, and something of Shakespeare; Dryden, Pope, Tennyson—to mention only the respectable among your ancestors—stir in your blood and sometimes move your pen a little to the right or to the left. In short, you are an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character, for which reason please treat yourself with respect and think twice before you dress up as Guy Fawkes and spring out upon timid old ladies at street corners, threatening death and demanding twopence halfpenny.

However, as you say that you are in a fix (“it has never been so hard to write poetry as it is today”) and that poetry may be, you think, at its last gasp in England (“the novelists are doing all the interesting things now”), let me while away the time before the

post goes in imagining your state and in hazarding one or two guesses which, since this is a letter, need not be taken too seriously or pressed too far. Let me try to put myself in your place; let me try to imagine, with your letter to help me, what it feels like to be a young poet in the autumn of 1931. (And, taking my own advice, I shall treat you not as one poet in particular, but as several poets in one.) On the floor of your mind, then, for it is this that makes you a poet, rhythm keeps up its perpetual beat. Sometimes it seems to die down to nothing; it lets you eat, sleep, talk like other people. Then again it swells and rises and attempts to sweep all the contents of your mind into one dominant dance. Tonight is such an occasion. Although you are alone, and have taken one boot off and are about to undo the other, you cannot go on with the process of undressing, but must instantly write at the bidding of the dance. You snatch pen and paper; you hardly trouble to hold the one or to straighten the other. And while you write, while the first stanzas of the dance are being fastened down, I will withdraw a little and look out of the window. A woman passes; then a man; a car glides to a stop and then—but there is no need to say what I see out of the window, nor indeed is there time, for I am suddenly recalled from my observation by a cry of rage or despair. Your



page is crumpled in a ball; your pen sticks upright by the nib in the carpet. If there were a cat to swing or a wife to murder, now would be the time. So at least I infer from the ferocity of your expression. You are rasped, jarred, thoroughly out of temper. And if I am to guess the reason, it is, I should say, that the rhythm which was opening and shutting with a force that sent shocks of excitement from your head to your heels has encountered some hard and hostile object upon which it has smashed itself to pieces. Something has worked in, which cannot be made into poetry; some foreign body, angular, sharp-edged, gritty, has refused to join in the dance. Obviously, suspicion attaches to Mrs. Gape; she has asked you to make a poem of her; then to Miss Curtis and her confidences on the omnibus; then to C., who has infected you with a wish to tell his story—and a very amusing one it was, too—in verse. But for some reason you cannot do their bidding. Chaucer could; Shakespeare could; so could Crabbe, Byron, and perhaps Robert Browning. But it is October, 1931, and for a long time now poetry has shirked contact with—what shall we call it?—shall we shortly and no doubt inaccurately call it life? It has left all that to the novelist. Here you see how easy it would be for me to write two or three volumes in honor of prose and in mockery of verse; to say how wide and ample is the

domain of the one, how starved and stunted the little grove of the other. But it would be simpler and perhaps fairer to check these theories by opening one of the thin books of modern verse that lie on your table. I open and I find myself instantly confuted. Here are the common objects of daily prose—the bicycle and the omnibus. Obviously, the poet is making his muse face facts. Listen:

Which of you waking early and watching daybreak  
Will not hasten in heart, handsome, aware of wonder  
At light unleashed, advancing, a leader of movement,  
Breaking like surf on turf on road and roof,  
Or chasing shadow on downs like whippet racing,  
The stilled stone, halting at eyelash barrier,  
Enforcing in face a profile, marks of misuse,  
Beating impatient and importunate on boudoir shutters  
Where the old life is not up yet, with rays  
Exploring through rotting floor a dismantled mill—  
The old life never to be born again?

Yes, but how will he get through with it? I read on and find:

. . . Whistling as he shuts  
His door behind him, travelling to work by tube  
Or walking the park to it to *ease the bowels*,

and read on and find again:

As a boy lately come up from country to town  
Returns for the day to his village in *expensive shoes*—  
and so on again to:

Seeking a heaven on earth he chases his shadow,  
Loses his capital and her nerve in pursuing  
What yachtmen, explorers, climbers and *buggers* are  
after.

These lines and the words I have emphasized are enough to confirm me in part of my guess at least. The poet is trying to include Mrs. Gape. He is honestly of opinion that she can be brought into poetry and will do very well there. Poetry, he feels, will be improved by the actual, the colloquial. But though I honor him for the attempt, I doubt that it is wholly successful. I feel a jar. I feel a shock. I feel as if I had stubbed my toe on the corner of the wardrobe. Am I then, I go on to ask, shocked, prudishly and conventionally, by the words themselves? I think not. The shock is literally a shock. The poet, as I guess, has trained himself to include an emotion that is not domesticated and acclimatized to poetry; the effort has thrown him off his balance; he rights himself, as I am sure I shall find if I turn the page, by a violent recourse to the poetical—he invokes the moon or the nightingale. Anyhow the transition is sharp. The poem is cracked in the middle. Look, it comes apart in my hands: here is reality on one side, here is beauty on the other; and instead of acquiring a whole object rounded and entire, I am left with broken parts on my hands, which, since my

reason has been roused and my imagination has not been allowed to take entire possession of me, I contemplate coldly, critically, and with distaste.

Such at least is the hasty analysis I make of my own sensations as a reader; but again I am interrupted. I see that you have overcome your difficulty whatever it was; the pen is once more in action, and having torn up the first poem you are at work upon another. Now then, if I want to understand your state of mind, I must invent another explanation to account for this return of fluency.

You have dismissed, as I suppose, all sorts of things that would come naturally to your pen if you had been writing prose—the charwoman, the omnibus, the incident on the channel boat. Your range is restricted—I judge from your expression—concentrated and intensified. I hazard a guess that you are thinking now not about things in general, but about yourself in particular. There is a fixity, a gloom, yet an inner glow that seem to hint that you are looking within and not without. But in order to consolidate these flimsy guesses about the meaning of an expression on a face let me open another of the books on your table and check it by what I find there. Again I open at random and read this:

To penetrate that room is my desire,  
The extreme attic of the mind, that lies

Just beyond the last bend in the corridor.  
Writing I do it. Phrases, poems are keys.  
Loving's another way (but not so sure).  
A fire's in there, I think, there's truth at last  
Deep in a lumber chest. Sometimes I'm near,  
But draughts puff out the matches, and I'm lost.  
Sometimes I'm lucky, find a key to turn,  
Open an inch or two,—but always then  
A bell rings, someone calls, or cries of "fire"  
Arrest my hand when nothing's known or seen,  
And running down the stairs again I mourn.

And then this:

There is a dark room,  
The locked and shuttered womb,  
Where negative's made positive.  
Another dark room,  
The blind and bolted tomb,  
Where positives change to negative.

We may not undo That or escape This, who  
Have birth and death coiled in our bones,  
Nothing we can do  
Will sweeten the real rue,  
That we begin, and end, with groans.

And then this:

Never being, but always at the edge of Being  
My head, like Death mask, is brought into the Sun.  
The shadow pointing finger across cheek,  
I move lips for tasting, I move hands for touching,  
But never am nearer than touching,  
Though the spirit leans outward for seeing.

Observing rose, gold, eyes, an admired landscape,  
My senses record the act of wishing  
Wishing to be  
Rose, gold, landscape or another—  
Claiming fulfilment in the act of loving.

Since these quotations are chosen at random and I have yet found three different poets writing about nothing if not about the poet himself, I hold that the chances are that you, too, are engaged in the same occupation. I conclude that self offers no impediment, self joins in the dance, self lends itself to the rhythm; it is apparently easier to write a poem about oneself than about any other subject. But what does one mean by "oneself"? Not the self that Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley have described—not the self that loves a woman, or that hates a tyrant, or that broods over the mystery of the world. No, the self that you are engaged in describing is shut out from all that. It is a self that sits alone in a room at night with the blinds drawn. In other words, the poet is much less interested in what we have in common than in what he has apart: in myself than in himself. Hence I suppose the extreme difficulty of these poems—and I have to confess that it would floor me completely to say from one reading or even from two or three what these poems mean. The poet is trying honestly and exactly, to describe a world that has

perhaps no existence except for one particular person at one particular moment. And the more sincere he is in keeping to the precise outline of the roses and cabbages of his private universe, the more he puzzles us who have agreed in a lazy spirit of compromise to see roses and cabbages as they are seen, more or less, by the twenty-six passengers on the outside of an omnibus. He strains to describe; we strain to see: he flickers his torch; we catch a flying gleam. It is exciting; it is stimulating; but is that a tree, we ask, or is it perhaps an old woman tying up her shoe in the gutter?

Well, then, if there is any truth in what I am saying—if, that is, you cannot write about the actual, the colloquial, Mrs. Gape or the channel boat or Miss Curtis on the omnibus, without straining the machine of poetry, if, therefore, you are driven to contemplate landscapes and emotions within and must render visible to the world at large what you alone see, then indeed yours is a hard case, and poetry, though still breathing—witness these little books—is drawing her breath in short, sharp gasps. Still, consider the symptoms. They are not the symptoms of death in the least. Death in literature (and I need not tell you how often literature has died in this country or in that) comes gracefully, smoothly, quietly. Lines slip easily down the accustomed grooves. The old de-

signs are copied so glibly that we are half inclined to think them original, save for that very glibness. But here the very opposite is happening: here in my first quotation the poet breaks his machine because he will clog it with raw fact. In my second, he is unintelligible because of his desperate determination to tell the truth about himself. Thus I cannot help thinking that, though you may be right in talking of the difficulty of the time, you are wrong to despair.

Is there not, alas, good reason to hope? I say "alas," because then I must give my reasons, which are bound to be foolish and certain also to cause pain to the large and highly respectable society of nekrophils—Mr. Peabody and his like—who much prefer death to life and are even now intoning the sacred and comfortable words, Keats is dead, Shelley is dead, Byron is dead. But it is late: nekrophily induces slumber; the old gentlemen have fallen asleep over their classics, and if what I am about to say takes a sanguine tone—and for my part I do not believe in poets dying (Keats, Shelley, Byron, are alive here in this room in you and you and you)—I can take comfort from the thought that my hoping will not disturb their snoring. So to continue: why should not poetry, now that it has so honestly scraped itself free from certain falsities, the wreckage of the great Victorian age, now that it has so sincerely gone down



into the mind of the poet and verified its outlines—a work of renovation that has to be done from time to time and was certainly needed, for bad poetry is almost always the result of forgetting oneself—all becomes distorted and impure if you lose sight of that central reality—now, I say, that poetry has done all this, why should it not once more open its eyes, look out of the window and write about other people? Two or three hundred years ago you were always writing about other people. Your pages were crammed with characters of the most opposite and various kinds—Hamlet, Cleopatra, Falstaff. Not only did we go to you for drama, and for the subtleties of human character, but we also went to you, incredible though this now seems, for laughter. You made us roar with laughter. Then later, not more than a hundred years ago, you were lashing our follies, trouncing our hypocrisies, and dashing off the most brilliant of satires. You were Byron, remember; you wrote “Don Juan.” You were Crabbe also; you took the most sordid details of the lives of peasants for your theme. Clearly, therefore, you have it in you to deal with a vast variety of subjects; it is only a temporary necessity that has shut you up in one room, alone, by yourself.

But how are you going to get out, into the world of other people? That is your problem now, if I may

hazard a guess—to find the right relationship, now that you know yourself, between the self that you know and the world outside. And it is a difficult problem. No living poet has, I think, altogether solved it. Moreover, there are a thousand voices prophesying despair. Science, they say, has made poetry impossible; there is no poetry in motor cars and wireless. And we have no religion. All is tumultuous and transitional. Therefore, so people say, there can be no relation between the poet and the present age. But surely that is nonsense. These accidents are superficial; they do not go nearly deep enough to destroy the most profound and primitive of instincts, the instinct of rhythm. All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments. I am talking nonsense, I know. What I mean is, summon all your courage, exert all your vigilance, invoke all the gifts that nature has been induced to bestow. Then let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever comes along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That, perhaps, is your task—to find the relation

between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters not spun out at length in the novelist's way, but condensed and synthesized in the poet's way—that is what we look to you to do now. But as I do not know what I mean by rhythm, and as most certainly I cannot tell you which objects can properly be combined together in a poem—that is entirely your affair—nor can I tell you how metre can be modulated to do this business, I will move on to safer ground and turn again to these little books themselves.

When, then, I return to them I am, as I have admitted, filled not with foreboding of death but with hopes for the future. But one does not always want to be thinking of the future, if, as sometimes happens, one is living in the present. When I read these poems, now, at the present moment, I find myself—reading, you know, is rather like opening the door to a horde of rebels who swarm out attacking one in twenty places at once—hit, roused, scraped, bared, swung through the air, so that life seems to flash by; then again blinded, knocked on the head—all of which are agreeable sensations for a reader

(since nothing is more dismal than to open the door and get no response,) and all, I believe, certain proof that this poet is alive and kicking. And yet mingling with these cries of delight, of jubilation, I record also, as I read, the repetition in the bass of one word intoned over and over again by some malcontent. At last then, silencing the others, I say to this malcontent, "Well, and what do *you* want?" Whereupon he replies, rather to my discomfort, "Beauty." Let me repeat, I take no responsibility for what my senses say when I read; I merely record the fact that there is a malcontent in me who complains that it seems to him odd considering that English is a mixed language, a rich language; a language unmatched for sound and color, for its power of imagery and suggestion—it seems to him odd that these modern poets should write as if they had neither ears nor eyes, neither soles to their feet nor palms to their hands, but only honest, enterprising book-fed brains, unisexual bodies, and—but here I interrupted him. For when it comes to saying that a poet should be bisexual, and that, I think, is what he was about to say, even I, who have had no scientific training whatsoever, draw the line and tell that voice to be silent.

But how far, if we discount these obvious absurdities, do you think that there is truth in this com-

plaint? For my own part now that I have stopped reading, and can see the poems more or less as a whole, I think it is true that the eye and the ear are starved of their rights. There is no sense of riches held in reserve behind the admirable exactitude of the lines I have quoted, as there is for example behind the exactitude of Mr. Yeats. And if this is so, I am ready to hazard a reason all the more readily because I think it bears out what I have just been saying. The art of writing, and that is perhaps what my malcontent means by beauty, the art of having at one's beck and call every word in the language, of knowing their weights, colors, sounds, associations, and thus making them, as is so necessary in English, suggest more than they can state, can be learnt of course to some extent by reading—it is impossible to read too much; but much more drastically and effectively by imagining that one is not oneself but somebody different. How can you learn to write if you write only about yourself? To take the obvious example. Can you doubt that the reason why Shakespeare knew every sound and syllable in the language and could do precisely what he liked with grammar and syntax was that Hamlet, Falstaff, and Cleopatra rushed him into this knowledge; that the lords, officers, dependants, murderers, and common soldiers of the plays insisted that he should say exactly what they

felt in the words befitting them? It was they who taught him to write, not the begetter of the Sonnets. So that if you want to satisfy all those senses that rise in a swarm whenever we drop a poem among them—the reason, the imagination, the eyes, the ears, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, not to mention a million more that the psychologists have yet to name, you will do well to embark upon a long poem in which people as unlike yourself as possible talk at the tops of their voices. And for heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty.

That, I am sure, is of very great importance. Most of the faults in the poems I have been reading can be explained, I think, by the fact that they have been exposed to the fierce light of publicity while they were still too young to stand the strain. It has shrivelled them into a skeleton austerity, both emotional and verbal, which should not be the characteristic of youth. The poet writes very well; he writes for the eye of a severe and intelligent public; but how much better he would have written if for ten years he had written for no eye but his own! After all, the years from twenty to thirty are years (let me refer to your letter again) of emotional excitement. The rain dripping, a wing flashing, some one passing—the commonest sounds and sights have power to fling one, as I seem to remember, from the heights of rapture

to the depths of despair. And if the actual life is thus extreme, the visionary life should be free to follow. Write then, now that you are young, nonsense by the ream. Be silly, be sentimental, imitate Shelley, imitate Samuel Smiles, give the rein to every impulse; commit every fault of style, grammar, taste, and syntax; pour out; tumble over; loose anger, love, satire, in whatever words you can catch, coerce or create, in whatever metre, prose, poetry, or gibberish that comes to hand. Thus you will learn to write. But if you publish, your freedom will be checked; you will be thinking what people will say; you will write for others when you ought only to be writing for yourself. And what point can there be in curbing the wild torrent of spontaneous nonsense which is now, for a few years only, your divine gift in order to publish prim little books of experimental verses? To make money? That, we both know, is out of the question. To get criticism? But your friends will pepper your manuscripts with far more serious and searching criticism than any you will get from reviewers. As for fame, look, I implore you, at famous people; see how the waters of dulness spread around them as they enter; observe their pomposity, their prophetic airs; reflect that the greatest poets were anonymous; think how Shakespeare cared nothing for fame; how Donne tossed his poems into the waste-

paper basket; write an essay giving a single instance of any modern English writer who has survived the disciples and the admirers, the autograph hunters and the interviewers, the dinners and the luncheons, the celebrations and the commemorations with which English society so effectively stops the mouths of its singers and silences their songs.

But enough. I, at any rate, will not be nekrophilous. So long as you and you and you, venerable and ancient representatives of Sappho, Shakespeare, and Shelley are aged precisely twenty-three and propose—O enviable fate!—to spend the next fifty years of your lives in writing poetry, I refuse to think that the art is dead. And if ever the temptation to nekrophilize comes over you, be warned by the fate of that old gentleman whose name I forget but I think that it was Peabody. In the very act of consigning all the arts to the grave he choked over a large piece of hot buttered toast, and the consolation then offered him that he was about to join the elder Pliny in the shades gave him, I am told, no sort of satisfaction whatsoever.

And now for the intimate, the indiscreet, and indeed the only really interesting parts of this letter . . .





## *Biographical Notes*



## XII

### *Biographical Notes*

**J**OSEPH CONRAD (1857-1924), though born of Polish parentage in the Ukraine and unacquainted with English until twenty years of age, so thoroughly mastered the idiom of the language that he became one of the great English story-tellers of the twentieth century. In his short stories and novels he has made excellent use of years of experience as a seaman. Among his best works are *The Nigger of The Narcissus*, *Tales of Unrest*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, and *Youth*.

ELIZABETH DREW took first class honors in English Language and Literature at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and was afterwards lecturer in English at Girton College, Cambridge. She still resides at Cambridge and lectures in the University. She has also lectured in this country. She is author of *The Modern Novel*, *Jane Welsh* and *Jane Carlyle* (recently drama-

tized and produced in London), *Discovering Poetry*, and *The Enjoyment of Literature* (1936).

ELLEN GLASGOW of Virginia has steered a sane course in her novels of Southern life, portraying neither a fabulously romantic South nor a South wholly made up of degenerates and monsters. Important among her representations of the life she knows so well are the following: *The Battleground*, *The Deliverance*, *Barren Ground*, *The Romantic Comedians*, and (her most recent) *Vein of Iron*.

PAUL GREEN, Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, grew up on a North Carolina farm with ample opportunity for observing the Southern negro and the white tenant farmer. These classes have found perhaps their most sympathetic treatment in Mr. Green's stories and plays. Though he has written short stories, two novels, and photoplays, his best work is found in his "folk drama." Among his publications the following are notable: *The Lord's Will and Other Carolina Plays*, *Lonesome Road*, *The Field God and in Abraham's Bosom* (the latter the Pulitzer prize play for 1927), *The House of Connelly and Other Plays*, *Tread the Green Grass*, *Hymn to the Rising Sun and Other One-Act Plays*,

*Shroud My Body Down*, and *Johnny Johnson* (now being presented on Broadway).

WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD, Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, began his publications of poetry with *Sonnets and Poems* in 1906. Since then he has published a number of volumes of poetry and prose. His outstanding poetic work is the sonnet sequence, *Two Lives*. Other publications are *The Vaunt of Man*, *Poems 1914-1916*, *The Lynching Bee*, *A Son of Earth* (his collected verse); and the prose volumes, *The Poet of Galilee* and his autobiography *The Locomotive God*. Mr. Leonard has also published some notable translations from the classics.

WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM reflects in his plays and stories the breadth of his observations and his experience. He was born in Paris, and he has studied widely both on the continent and in England. He has produced a number of successful plays, but his reputation rests largely upon his short stories and the great novel, *Of Human Bondage*. Other works are *Mrs. Craddock*; *The Merry-Go-Round*; *The Moon and Sixpence*; *Cakes and Ale, or the Skeleton in the Cupboard*; and *East and West*. His latest publications are *Cosmopolitans* (a collection of short stories

and sketches) and *Don Fernando* (a story of old Spain).

HAROLD NICOLSON distinguished himself first as a diplomat. In his essay included in this volume he tells of beginning his work in biography, in which field he is now most outstanding. Notable among his biographies are *Paul Verlain*; *Tennyson*; *Byron: The Last Journey*; *Swinburne*; *Lord Carnock* (a tribute to his father); and *Dwight Morrow* (1935). In his *Development of English Biography* Mr. Nicolson has made a most valuable contribution to the study of biography.

JOHN P. WATERS has contributed articles—mainly humorous—to *Life*, *Judge*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and other leading magazines. His mastery of the style of the informal essay as well as his discernment in observing its history is evident in his essay included in this collection. Mr. Waters is at present engaged in writing advertisements and managing the publicity for a prominent manufacturing firm.

EDITH WHARTON early attracted the interest of Henry James and came under his influence. Like him she has spent a great part of her life in Europe and reflects in her writing much of the life and cul-

ture of Europe. She usually takes her characters, however, from the social circle of New York into which she was herself born. Her greatest novels are *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome* (recently dramatized), *The Age of Innocence* (Pulitzer prize novel in 1920), *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Twilight Sleep*, *Hudson River Bracketed*. Among her short stories are the following volumes: *Old New York*, *Here and Beyond*, and *Certain People*. Besides the essay included in this collection, which is taken from a recent publication, *A Backward Glance*, Mrs. Wharton has published a volume most helpful to the creative writer entitled *The Writing of Fiction*.

VIRGINIA WOOLF's contributions to literature have been mainly in the form of the essay and the novel, but the quality of her prose should make one interested in writing heed what she has to say concerning any form of it. Important among her novels are *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Waves*, and the unique *Orlando*. Her best essays have appeared in *The Common Reader* and *The Second Common Reader*. In *A Room of One's Own* Mrs. Woolf discusses the obstacles which women encounter in the world of letters. Mrs. Woolf has long been a distinguished member of the Bloomsbury group of writers.



PHILIP WYLIE has contributed mystery stories and other stories and articles to most of the leading magazines and has written a number of novels which have been well received. He is author of *Babes and Sucklings*, *Footprint of Cinderella*, *Gladiator*, *Murderer Invisible*, *As They Reveled* (1936), and other stories and novels; and is joint author of a number, among them being *The Savage Gentleman*, *After Worlds Collide*, and *Golden Hoard*. Mr. Wylie spends much time in Hollywood on writing assignments for various studios.

















UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY



136 078

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY